

The sunlight seeped through the slats of the blinds in narrow, fractured beams, but it brought no warmth to the desolate Heartlands compound. The stillness in the air was oppressive, thick with the weight of absence. Ramsey stood in the center of the courtyard, his sharp gaze scanning the empty expanse where men once bustled with purpose. Now, there was nothing but silence.

The realization crept in, slow and suffocating. Half their men—loyal, seasoned Heartlands operatives—had been replaced by members of the allied gangs last week. Hiram's decision, hailed as a tactical masterstroke at the time, had come back to haunt them. The allied members were gone. Every one of them had vanished in the night, their vehicles missing from the lot, their barracks emptied, and their spots at the weapons cache abandoned.

Ramsey's chest tightened as the implications set in. Without those replacements, the Heartlands were gutted. The force that had once dominated Leeds was now a shadow of itself, a hollow shell on the brink of collapse. He turned to the last few loyalists still lingering in the courtyard, their faces pale and uncertain.

"Boss..." one of them spoke hesitantly, stepping closer. "They're all gone. The Iron Serpents, the Black Cobras, the Vipers—every last one of them."

"I know," Ramsey said curtly, his voice steady but carrying an edge sharp enough to cut steel.

The man hesitated, his brow furrowed with doubt. "Do you think they—"

"They didn't just leave." Ramsey's words cut him off. "This was planned."

He didn't wait for a response. His mind was already moving as he strode toward Hiram's chambers.

The halls of the compound, once buzzing with activity, were now eerily quiet. The distant hum of the city outside only served to emphasize the emptiness within. Ramsey passed by rooms that once echoed with camaraderie—men cleaning their weapons, strategizing, laughing. All of it was gone.

Hiram's decision to integrate the allied gangs had been reckless, and Ramsey had said so at the time. But Hiram had been convinced.

Ramsey's jaw clenched at the memory. He had warned him, told him the Heartlands didn't need fair-weather allies. Hiram hadn't listened, and now the consequences were staring them all in the face.

The walk to Hiram's chambers felt like an eternity, the tension in the air growing heavier with each step. When Ramsey reached the door, he didn't knock. Instead, he shoved it open with enough force to send it crashing against the wall.

Hiram was hunched over his desk, papers scattered before him like the remnants of a failed plan. He flinched at the sudden intrusion, his eyes darting up to meet Ramsey's. There was no trace of his usual jovial demeanor. His face was pale, his hands trembling slightly as they rested on the desk.

"Boss," Hiram began, his voice shaky, "I—"



"Don't." Ramsey's voice was low, cold, and brimming with barely contained fury. He crossed the room in quick strides, stopping just short of the desk. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Hiram rose from his chair, hands raised defensively. "I didn't—this wasn't supposed to happen! They—"

"They what?" Ramsey snapped, his tone cutting like a blade. "They just decided to pack up and leave in the dead of night? They coordinated a mass exodus without you noticing?"

Hiram's mouth opened, but no words came out. He looked away, his shoulders slumping under the weight of the accusation.

"You handed them control," Ramsey continued, his voice steady but filled with venom. "You stripped us of our own men and replaced them with outsiders. And now, because of your idiotic gamble, the Heartlands are defenseless."

Hiram's fists clenched, his frustration bubbling to the surface. "I was trying to save us!" he shot back, his voice cracking. "We needed the numbers, Boss. We couldn't hold Leeds on our own anymore, not with the way things were going."

"And now we have nothing." Ramsey's words were calm, but the quiet intensity behind them was more terrifying than a shout. "Half our men, gone. The allied gangs, gone. And us? Sitting here like lambs waiting for the slaughter."

Hiram's face turned pale as Ramsey's words sank in. His breath quickened, his composure crumbling like a wall under siege. He stumbled back into his chair, clutching the edge of the desk as if the weight of the situation would send him tumbling to the floor.

"I'm sorry, Boss," Hiram whispered, his voice barely audible. "I thought... I thought I had everything under control. Please, trust me—I'll tell you everything truthfully."

Ramsey's eyes bore into him, cold and unyielding. "We don't have time for confessions," he said, his tone sharp as steel. "They know

us. They know our location. This compound might be hidden from the city, but it's isolated—too isolated. When they come, they'll bring everything. They won't just attack us, Hiram. They'll eradicate us."

Hiram tried to interject, his voice trembling. "I... I'm sure it won't be as drastic as—"

"Check your messages," Ramsey cut him off, his voice low but brimming with a controlled fury that sent a chill through the room. He gestured to Hiram's phone with a curt nod. "Look at yourself. You've been on edge for the last week, drowning in threats and demands. You left me in the dark, but don't think for a second that I didn't see the cracks forming."

Ramsey stepped closer, leaning over the desk, his imposing figure casting a shadow over Hiram. "I know they've been threatening you. Demanding you pay back the money. And now, with the allied gangs walking out, they've shown you what words couldn't—actions. The next move isn't just a message, Hiram. It's the final blow."

Hiram fumbled with his phone, his shaking hands struggling to unlock it. "When—" he started, his voice cracking, "when do you think they're going to act?"

Ramsey's jaw tightened. "Today."

"Today?!" Hiram's voice shot up, his panic spilling over. He shot to his feet, knocking over a stack of papers on the desk. "You're serious? Today?"

Ramsey's expression remained calm, but his eyes gleamed with a deadly certainty. "The writing's on the wall," he said. "Our forces are thinned out, scattered. No better time than now."

"Oh my God..." Hiram whispered, running a hand over his head, his panic escalating. "What are we going to do, Boss? We're sitting ducks. They'll—"

"Enough!" Ramsey's sharp command cut through the air like a whip, silencing Hiram mid-sentence. He stepped back, his mind already calculating, his tone switching to the precise, authoritative voice of a leader born for crisis.

"Get our boys ready. Arm them. Man every defense post in this compound. Execute my security measures from the control room."

Hiram hesitated, but Ramsey's piercing glare left no room for argument.

"Now, Hiram."

As Hiram scrambled to obey, Ramsey turned and began pacing the room. His mind was a whirlwind of strategy, his years of experience in both war and deception coming to the forefront. He couldn't let

the panic seep into his men. Fear was a contagion, and right now, he needed them focused, not terrified.

He moved to the tall window, looking out over the compound. The Heartlands' hideout was a three-storied mansion surrounded by towering walls, its imposing structure nestled deep in the Farmlands. Between the mansion and the perimeter wall lay three acres of open land, a lush expanse that had served as both a buffer and a blind spot. Now, it was their Achilles' heel.

"It's too much open ground," Ramsey muttered, his voice low as he scanned the fields. "Perfect for snipers. They'll use it to suppress us while they breach the gates. If they're smart—and they are—they've already calculated how long it'll take to overwhelm us."

He turned back to Hiram, who was frantically typing commands into a console. "Seal the secondary exits. Route power to the reinforced gates. And disable any automated locks—they could hack them remotely."

Hiram hesitated, then asked, "But what if they've got inside help? They could already know our weak spots."

Ramsey turned to him, his gaze colder than ever. "Then we make sure the only way they're getting in is through hellfire."

He pulled out his phone, tapping into the compound's security network. Camera feeds flickered to life on the screen, showing every

corner of the perimeter. Ramsey studied them with the precision of a sniper, looking for vulnerabilities, for any sign of movement.

"This isn't just about survival," Ramsey said, his voice steady and resolute. "This is a war. And if they think we're cornered, they've underestimated us. They'll learn—no one outmaneuvers the Heartlands."

The tension in the room shifted, the air charged with an intensity that came not from fear but from the steely resolve of a man who had been in worse situations and walked out victorious. Hiram, though still visibly shaken, found himself nodding, his hands moving faster across the console.

Afternoon

The late afternoon sun dipped lower, painting the sky with hues of orange and red, as the distant hum of engines echoed through the Farmlands. Dozens of trucks and cars were making their way down the long, narrow road leading to the Heartlands' hideout. The mansion loomed large ahead, its three stories silhouetted against the sprawling, desolate land. Beyond the mansion, the walls that surrounded the compound seemed both imposing and vulnerable—just waiting to be tested.

Hiram shifted nervously from foot to foot, his eyes darting between the distant horizon and Ramsey, who stood silent, watching the

slow-moving procession of rival gang vehicles with a calculating gaze. His hands were clasped behind his back, his posture unshaken.

"Boss, I—" Hiram began, his voice tinged with uncertainty. He hesitated, looking at the compound around them. "This is crazy. We don't have the numbers for a direct fight, and this place... it's too exposed. They'll overrun us before we can even react."

Ramsey's eyes didn't leave the horizon. He could almost taste the tension in the air, the electricity that crackled with every passing second. "They think they're in control," he muttered, more to himself than to Hiram. "They think they have us cornered."

Hiram scowled. "What does that mean, Boss? You can't just stand here—"

"I'm not standing here," Ramsey interrupted quietly, his voice cold. "I'm watching."

Hiram stared at him, bewildered. He wanted to argue, to insist that they needed to act, but Ramsey's focus was elsewhere, as if he had already seen the outcome of this battle play out in his mind. He couldn't understand it. It was risky, dangerously so. They were outnumbered. They were exposed.

But then, as if on cue, the first vehicle from the rival gang appeared on the dirt road, dust trailing behind it like a bad omen. The others quickly followed, their headlights cutting through the gathering

dusk. Trucks, SUVs, and cars packed with men—dozens of them, all heading toward the Heartlands' hideout.



Ramsey watched, unmoving. The corner of his mouth twitched as he saw them draw closer.

The rival gang members weren't prepared for what they would find.

"We've set the perimeter," Ramsey said without turning to Hiram, his voice calm but firm. "Our men know their positions. They'll be ready."

Hiram's fingers tightened around his own arms, his unease growing. "But there's no way we can hold out for long. We need backup—more men—"

"We have enough," Ramsey cut him off. "We have the right men."

Hiram glanced toward the mansion, his eyes darting to the walls, the open field, and the trees surrounding the compound. It seemed impossible. The open land between the mansion and the wall was too exposed, too vulnerable. There was no way to defend every inch of it without being overwhelmed. Ramsey's plan—whatever it was—didn't seem to account for the sheer numbers of the rival gangs. His doubts grew heavier with every passing second.

Then, another truck appeared on the horizon, then another, then another—dozens more.

Ramsey's fingers twitched, but his expression remained stone cold. He didn't speak, but Hiram could feel the weight of his presence, the quiet, almost predatory focus in his posture.

"You said yourself they won't be expecting us to fight back this aggressively," Ramsey said, his voice low. "That's their mistake."

Hiram frowned, his eyes narrowing with skepticism. "What are you talking about? If we don't strike fast enough—"

"I've thought of everything," Ramsey said with quiet confidence. "We don't need more men. We just need to make sure they play into our hands."

Hiram stared at him, confusion mounting in his chest. "How? How are we supposed to—"

But before he could finish, the first truck reached the edge of the compound. Ramsey's eyes locked onto it, his mind already calculating the next step.

The engines roared as the trucks skidded to a halt. Hiram could see the first few men beginning to unload, guns drawn, their movements rushed but controlled. They were already fanning out, preparing for the assault.

"They think it's that easy," Ramsey murmured, almost to himself. "But they don't know what we've set up."

Hiram swallowed hard, trying to mask the anxiety creeping up his throat. "Boss, this is getting out of hand. We can't just—"

Ramsey finally turned to him, his eyes cold and unyielding. "We don't need to hold out, Hiram. We just need to survive long enough."

And with that, the first shots rang out.

It was sudden, swift—a volley of gunfire from the main gate as the rival gang made their move. Hiram's breath caught in his throat as he watched, but Ramsey didn't flinch.

The plan—whatever it was—had begun.

They had no choice now. The game had started. And Ramsey, for all his quiet confidence, was relying on more than just brute force. He was betting everything on the hope that the enemy would walk into their lawn.

The first truck barreled through the compound's gates with the loud screech of metal grinding against concrete. Its headlights cut through the dusk, throwing long shadows across the lawn. Men piled out of the vehicle, guns raised, ready to take down anyone who dared to oppose them. But as they stepped onto the ground, they failed to notice the barely visible markers hidden in the grass—hidden to all but those who knew to look.

The sound came first, distant and faint—like a whisper of the earth shifting underfoot. Then the ground gave way beneath them.

Boom! A blinding flash of light, a wave of heat, and a deep, earth-shattering tremor erupted from the ground. The truck flew into the air, spinning like a ragdoll. Men were thrown back, their screams muffled by the deafening roar of the explosion. A moment later, the shockwave slammed into the second truck that had been too close, hurling it off course and sending it crashing into a pile of rocks.



Hynam gasped, his eyes wide with disbelief. "What the hell—"

Ramsey didn't flinch. He didn't even blink. His focus was unwavering, watching the monitors flicker as the chaos unfolded in real time. *First step* was complete. The enemy had taken the bait, and they were walking straight into the trap.

From the trees to the right, the snipers opened fire. High-caliber shots rang out with pinpoint accuracy, each bullet finding its mark. One of the rival gang members went down, a clean shot through the head. Another staggered as a bullet ripped through his shoulder, sending him to the ground with a guttural scream.

"Cover the gate! Move!" shouted the rival gang leader from the second truck, his voice hoarse with panic.

More men scrambled for cover, seeking shelter behind their vehicles, weapons drawn. But their formation was falling apart, scattered by the chaos.

That's when Ramsey's men in the mansion windows struck.

The sharp crack of gunfire echoed from above, coming from the second floor. Three enemies dropped within seconds, each hit clean and precise. The Heartlands marksmen knew the moment was coming, and they fired only when the enemy was positioned just right. They took out the ones who might have returned fire, keeping the rival gang leaders exposed.

Then, Ramsey's voice cut through the comms, calm and steady, yet loaded with command. "Move them in. Now."

On cue, a hidden hatch beneath the compound's outer walls creaked open. From below the earth, a second wave of Heartlands soldiers emerged, not from the front but from the sides, flanking the now-disoriented enemy from two directions. The rival gang leader had no idea what was happening. The men in front were being picked off by snipers, while those behind them were trapped between a fortified position and the incoming ambush.

As the rival gang scrambled for any semblance of cover, they found the ground suddenly working against them. More hidden pressure plates clicked into place, and a chain of explosions burst through the earth like veins of fire. They were too slow to react, and were sent

flying by the blast. Screams were cut short as the bodies hit the ground, blood pooling in the dirt.

In the confusion, several of the gang members ran, but they were met with gunfire from all sides. The Heartlands men didn't hesitate. They knew exactly where each of the enemies would be—and when. Another group of rival soldiers, already retreating, ran straight into the courtyard—where they were immediately engulfed in a series of flashes and loud, sharp cracks as more explosives detonated.

But Ramsey wasn't done yet.

As the dust from the explosions settled, Ramsey's voice came again, eerily calm: "They think it's over."

At the far end of the compound, near the gates, a series of powerful, long-range floodlights snapped on, blinding the remaining members of the rival gang. As they recoiled from the light, a group of Heartlands soldiers emerged from the shadows behind them, armed with high-caliber automatic rifles, and opened fire.

A dozen more enemies fell before they had even registered what was happening.

Hiram, standing just a few feet away from Ramsey, watched in stunned silence as the compound came alive with explosions, gunfire, and chaos. "You—" he began, his voice barely a whisper. "You knew this would happen."

Ramsey didn't even look at him. "They always underestimate us."

The rival gang was now in full retreat. Disorganized and panicked, their numbers were dwindling quickly. The heart of the attack had been ripped open and laid bare. The truck convoy that had arrived so confidently was now nothing but burning wrecks scattered across the land.

There were only a handful left now—those who had either stayed far behind or managed to take cover in the trees. But they had underestimated one final detail.

The exit they thought was open—a gap in the wall—wasn't. It had been rigged. As the remaining men rushed toward it, desperate to escape, an explosion tore through the outer barricade, sealing the only remaining route. A final trap.

The few who were still standing were trapped. No escape. No way out.

And as the last few enemies dropped to the ground, silenced by the final wave of fire from the Heartlands' sniper nest, Ramsey allowed himself the smallest of smiles.

It was a trap, yes—but not just any trap. A calculated move, designed to make every step of the enemy's advance feel like a mistake they could never undo.

And in that moment, Hiram realized just how dangerous the boss really was. How much risk he was willing to take—and how much of it was already in motion.

The sun was beginning to set behind the shattered compound, casting long shadows across the wreckage. Smoke rose from the smoldering remains of trucks, and the ground was littered with bodies—men who had once believed they were invincible, now reduced to nothing more than casualties of a meticulously executed plan. The air was thick with the stench of gunpowder, fire, and blood.

Amidst the carnage, Luigi "Big Lu" Ricci, leader of the Steel Knights, was no longer the imposing figure he had once been. His leather jacket was torn, his face streaked with dirt and sweat. His massive hands trembled as he wiped his brow, eyes wide with disbelief. The man who had led a brutal empire of extortion and violence was now cowering in the dirt, his body pressed against the charred remains of a wrecked truck.



His men were gone. The carefully orchestrated attack, the one he'd banked on to crush the Heartlands once and for all, had fallen apart in the blink of an eye. His forces, shattered by explosions, gunfire, and well-placed ambushes, had been wiped out faster than he could give a single command.

He could still hear the faint echoes of the explosions ringing in his ears, his mind replaying the destruction over and over. He had underestimated Ramsey, thinking the man was broken, weakened, easy to crush under the weight of the Heartlands' failures. But it wasn't Ramsey who had fallen apart—it was him. It was *his* entire force, disintegrating in an instant, without a prayer.

Luigi's breath came in ragged gasps as he tried to regain his composure. He looked up at the wreckage of the compound, his heart pounding in his chest. His mind raced. How had it all gone so wrong?

A shadow loomed over him, dark against the fiery wreckage. The unmistakable figure of Ramsey, the Boss himself, stepped out from the mansion. His tall frame was still, like a predator on the hunt. His eyes were cold, unblinking, surveying the devastation around him. The remnants of his men, battered and bruised, stood at attention, watching from a distance, fear etched on their faces. But none of them dared to make a move.

Ramsey's hand was steady as he held a pistol in his gloved fingers, his eyes fixed on Luigi.

Click.

The sound of the safety being disengaged echoed in the dead air.

Slowly, Ramsey began walking toward him, each step measured, deliberate, as if he had all the time in the world. His presence alone made the air feel heavier, as though the world itself was holding its breath. The remaining rival gang members, who had managed to escape the worst of the slaughter, watched in terrified silence, their eyes flicking between Ramsey and the leader they once followed.

Luigi's eyes widened, his chest heaving with fear. He pushed himself up onto shaky legs, backing away from the oncoming figure. His hands trembled uncontrollably, and his voice cracked as he spoke.

"How... how did you... *how did you do this?*"

Ramsey stopped a few feet from him, his voice low but sharp. "So... Luigi... had your fun?"

Big Lu's eyes narrowed, and his lips curled into a snarl, though it lacked conviction. "DA... DAMN YOU! HOW DID YOU—" He broke off, his words stumbling as he saw the expression on Ramsey's face—cold, unwavering, like a man who had just witnessed the destruction of an empire, and reveled in it.

Ramsey's eyes locked with his, and for a moment, there was silence. Then Ramsey spoke again, his voice slow and deliberate, the weight of each word sinking deep.

"*Sssshhhh....* Now you know who's in charge?" His voice was a dangerous whisper, but it carried the undeniable power of a leader who had returned from the brink, stronger than ever. "Me... not Hiram. *It is me.*"

Luigi's jaw tightened, his anger boiling over as he reached for his sidearm, only to stop mid-motion when Ramsey raised the pistol, aiming it directly at him with effortless precision. "But... but I saw you!" Luigi shouted, his voice cracking. "I saw you, you were broken! You were a doll... *Hiram broke you!*"

Ramsey's lips twitched into a cold, almost predatory smile. "*Well...* Guess I'm reborn."

A tense silence filled the air, the world holding its breath as Luigi's eyes flicked between Ramsey and the men still watching—his men,

his allies—who now seemed to fade into the background of this final, pivotal moment.

Luigi's voice cracked as he gasped, realizing the magnitude of the situation unraveling before him. "You don't know what you've done! The others are gonna come and—"

Ramsey's cold, unblinking gaze locked onto him, his grip on the pistol unwavering. "And will be eradicated the same way."

For a moment, the world seemed to still. The only sound was the distant crackle of flames licking the horizon, the remnants of the Steel Knights' once-proud force scattered across the field. But then, suddenly, the static of Luigi's comms device buzzed to life. A crackling voice, rough and confident, cut through the air like a blade.

"Luigi... did you destroy them yourself or is the party still left?"

Luigi's eyes widened as recognition surged through him. He broke into a twisted, manic laugh, a mix of relief and desperation. "Samir! AHAHAHA, YES! Samir, finally! No, this piece of shit got me, man. They got me bad. But I am so glad... I'm so glad you're here."

There was a brief silence before Samir's voice came through again, cold and calculated, with an edge of mockery. "Oh? Guess I was right to send you all along."

"Huh?" Luigi's confusion was brief, overshadowed by his excitement at the thought of reinforcements.

Samir's tone shifted, colder now, a calculated venom. "Don't worry, your pain will be at an end."

A low, throbbing hum suddenly filled the air. The faint sound of helicopters, growing ever louder, pierced through the fog of confusion and panic. Their approaching shadows darkened the sky, painting it in a sinister red hue. Ramsey's sharp eyes flickered upwards, a rare moment of surprise crossing his features.

This... wasn't part of the plan.

Luigi's eyes glittered with wild hope. "Oh... oh-hohoho! Thank God, Samir, thank God! Show these pricks what Steel Knights and Red Shadows together can do!"

Ramsey's mind raced. The Red Shadows? That wasn't supposed to be in play. His men had the field secured. His calculations were precise. But now—now, there were *helicopters* in the sky, and they weren't his.

The whirring of the rotor blades grew deafening as the two helicopters cut through the sky, their massive forms looming overhead. Ramsey's blood ran cold. He'd underestimated this alliance, and now, his men were exposed. His eyes darted back to the mansion, to the remaining forces still inside, still in the open.

Ramsey's pulse quickened, adrenaline surging through him as he shouted, his voice sharp with urgency, "Move! *Now!* Get out of the mansion! All of you—MOVE!"

But before the chaos could fully unfold, Samir's voice crackled through the comms again, more sinister than before.

Samir's voice crackled through the comms, cold and calculated, sending a chill through Luigi's body. "Steel Knights and Red Shadows? Oh, you are wrong, I'm afraid..."

A pregnant pause hung in the air, the tension thick as the sound of the helicopter's rotors cut through the night. Then Samir's voice returned, dripping with malice.

"It..."

The hum of the machinery grew louder, the unmistakable grind of gears turning, followed by the sharp *click* of a weapons port opening.

"IS..."

There was a hiss, and the sound of missile pods locking into position echoed through the channel.

"Only THE RED SHADOWS!"

The sky erupted in fire.

The first missile screamed down with terrifying speed, the sound of its descent cutting through the air like a razor. It slammed into the compound with an earth-shattering explosion, sending a blast wave that shook the ground beneath Ramsey's feet.

Luigi barely had time to register what was happening—his eyes wide with disbelief as the shockwave threw him to the ground. He gasped for air, his body battered by the force, but it was too late. The second missile followed, striking just moments later. It hit the heart of the field, obliterating everything in its path.

Screams echoed through the chaos as fire and rubble rained down, engulfing the area in a fiery storm.

"No... no, NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" Luigi's voice was hoarse, frantic, but it was swallowed by the deafening roar of the blasts. His body was thrown against the dirt, and then—

Another missile. The third blast hit with a thunderous crack, tearing through the heart of the compound. The heat from the explosion was unbearable, the blast so intense that it sent shockwaves through the entire field. The ground trembled, the sky lit up with the flames of the impact.

Ramsey's mind raced—he hadn't calculated this. He hadn't expected an all-out assault. This was no longer just a skirmish; it was an obliteration. His men scrambled, shouting over the chaos, but it was clear—their defenses had crumbled in an instant.

"Luigi... you thought you were part of the plan?" Samir chuckled darkly. "No. *You* were just bait. *I* was always going to win."

Ramsey's eyes darted to the sky. More helicopters were coming. He could see them now, their silhouettes looming over the wreckage. They were just beginning.

The scene before Ramsey was one of absolute devastation. The air was thick with smoke, the ground scorched and cratered, the once-mighty mansion now a charred ruin. Flames curled and danced, eating away at the remnants of what had been a fortress. In the midst of the chaos, Ramsey stood alone near a broken wall, his eyes sharp, his mind calculating, unfazed by the destruction that surrounded him.



He scanned the wreckage, checking on his men and Hiram. His calculations were precise. The survivors had made their way underground or out of the mansion's immediate blast zone. He let out a breath of relief. They were alive.

But then his gaze turned to the sky. The helicopters.

Six of them—Red JetRangers, heavily customized with weapons. They hovered in place, a menacing black-and-red formation, like vultures circling a dying prey.

Ramsey's mind shifted into overdrive. He counted the distance, the angle of the helicopters, the height at which they were hovering. His eyes flickered as he mentally calculated the odds. These weren't just any helicopters. These were highly modified, sturdy, and heavily armed, built to withstand gunfire. They were designed for precision strikes. But Ramsey wasn't concerned about their armor. His focus was the weakest link.

He analyzed the windshield—the laminated glass. *Sturdy, but penetrable*. He could already see it in his mind's eye: the trajectory, the pressure points, the way the glass would fracture under the right conditions.

He tilted his head slightly, squinting against the dust and haze that filled the air. He was looking for the sweet spot. There was no time to waste.

The helicopters were hovering at a height of roughly 150 meters, give or take. The wind speed was low—no gusts to deal with. That worked in his favor. With no obstructions, he could focus entirely on the shot.

Ramsey's breath slowed as his eyes traced the path of one of the helicopters. He'd done the math. In terms of distance, it was a little over 300 meters from where he stood. His mind flicked through the calculations:

Wind velocity negligible. Angle of attack: near perpendicular. Glass thickness: approximately 15 millimeters.

He knew that the bullet would need to maintain a steady velocity to penetrate the glass, which would require an exacting shot. But the real trick lay in the timing—he would need to account for the downward angle of the shot. That meant the bullet would need to travel a slightly curved trajectory, compensating for gravity's pull.

It was precise work.

The helicopters were circling, their weapons trained on the survivors below. They weren't moving, but they wouldn't stay stationary for long. Ramsey's mind clicked through the calculations. He was dealing with the curvature of the Earth, the mass of the bullet, the angle of the shot. The height, the velocity, the air density.

At this point, in this position, the odds were impossible. No man alive, no matter how skilled, could win this fight alone. Not here. Not now. Even with a sniper rifle in hand, a perfect shot at a helicopter's windshield from this height would be a challenge. *Let alone six helicopters.*

But Ramsey wasn't just anybody. He wasn't merely an agent. He was something else entirely. A ghost in the wind, a lethal force honed by years of training, and most importantly, he was *the Sharpest Sharpshooter on the planet.*

No one could calculate like Ramsey. No one could analyze, adjust, and execute with the kind of cold precision he brought to every task. Where others would hesitate, Ramsey acted with ruthless efficiency, understanding the laws of physics and human anatomy with equal clarity.

It was all within the realm of possibility for him.



Six helicopters. Six shots. Six kills.

Ramsey's finger twitched on the trigger, his stance shifting, his grip tightening.

He adjusted his aim, allowing for the exact moment when the helicopter would hover directly in line with his shot. The glass. The focal point.

The shot was the moment he'd been waiting for.

At the right moment, Ramsey fired.

The shot rang out with a sharp crack that cut through the heavy air. The bullet sliced through the wind with deadly precision. It curved through the air like a whisper, zeroing in on the targeted glass of the first helicopter.

Time seemed to slow. Ramsey's heart didn't race. His eyes didn't falter. The bullet tore through the air with brutal accuracy, crashing into the windshield of the first JetRanger.

The glass shattered like a spider's web, the bullet's trajectory perfect. The pilot's scream was muted by the violent explosion that followed as the helicopter erupted into flames, spiraling out of control.

Ramsey didn't wait. As the first helicopter fell, he took aim at the second. The math, the calculations, they all ran in his head like a second nature. His training had ingrained every little detail. Every fiber of his being was attuned to the moment. A heartbeat. A breath.

Another shot.

The second helicopter's windshield crumpled under the impact, the explosion sending it into a tailspin, joining its predecessor in the sky's fiery descent.

Four more to go. Ramsey's focus was unshakable.

He adjusted for the wind. He recalculated. He fired again. Another helicopter fell, just as easily.

Just as Ramsey was about to take his third shot, the air split with a deafening roar. A missile shot toward him, cutting through the sky like a deadly streak of lightning. His pulse quickened, but his mind—his mind was already calculating.

Trajectory. Speed. Distance.

The missile was coming in fast, but Ramsey's brain had already processed its path, every variable falling into place in a perfect sequence of calculations. His body was calm, poised. No panic. No hesitation. He simply knew what he had to do.

He raised his handgun without thinking, finger already on the trigger. *One shot. One perfect shot.*

Time seemed to stretch. His eyes locked onto the missile, tracking its speed, angle, and the air currents that could alter its path. His heartbeat slowed, his mind sharp—this was the moment.

With a single, controlled breath, Ramsey squeezed the trigger.

The bullet flew from his gun with a whisper, cutting through the air. The world went still. Everything around him blurred. It wasn't just a shot. This was precision, honed by years of training, experience, and something deeper. His mind had become the weapon.

The missile was close now, the heat from its engine beginning to scorch the air around him. But Ramsey had already calculated the distance, the time, the perfect point of impact. The bullet met the missile's warhead mid-flight, detonating it in a violent explosion that lit up the sky.

Boom.

The shockwave hit him, but his body didn't flinch. His focus never wavered. He barely noticed the heat on his skin, the dust in his eyes. It didn't matter. The first missile was down.

Before the debris even had time to settle, another missile screamed toward him, cutting through the smoke with frightening speed. *Two more. Just like before.*

His mind was already calculating again, anticipating the missile's trajectory and speed. The milliseconds stretched as he measured the seconds in his mind.

Calculations running—wind velocity, missile velocity, altitude.

This time, the missile was moving even faster, its engine roaring louder, its path even more erratic. Ramsey's finger was already moving. The gun raised with a practiced flick of his wrist, each motion seamless. Without even needing to look at the target, his brain had already adjusted for the next shot.

He fired again, and as the bullet left the barrel, Ramsey felt an almost surreal sense of clarity. Everything was in perfect harmony. Time seemed to bend. The bullet cut through the air, zeroing in on its target.

Impact.

Another missile disintegrated in mid-air, vaporizing in a burst of fiery destruction. The heat washed over him, but he didn't even blink. His focus never faltered.

Two down.

Another missile shot toward him. *Three.* His mind barely processed the incoming danger before he already knew the solution.

Ramsey's body was now operating on a level of instinct and calculation that was beyond human comprehension. His reflexes were faster than ever. His thoughts raced ahead of the missile, working faster than his fingers, which felt no strain.

This wasn't just about surviving anymore. This wasn't about *him*. This was about *everything* he had fought for. About the Heartlands, about the empire he had built over two decades. The stakes had shifted. He was no longer just a man in a fight for his life—he was the last line of defense.

He was going to make this right.

His gun didn't even hesitate, moving as naturally as his breathing. The bullet flew, splitting the air with a sharp crack, and again, it met its target.

Boom.

The third missile exploded in a flash of light. The shockwave sent debris swirling in the air, but Ramsey was already preparing for the next one.

Four.

Another missile launched—faster, angrier, more desperate.

Ramsey's mind didn't miss a beat. Each calculation fed into the next. No wasted motion. No delay. He was in complete sync with the universe around him, his body and mind working as one.

He fired. The bullet left his gun, cutting through the smoke, the sound of the explosion already fading in the distance.

The missile disappeared in a burst of fire and fragments.

Five.

One more.

His breath didn't falter. His mind was razor-sharp. But his senses were on fire, and he could feel the last missile coming. Faster. Stronger. This one was different.

Ramsey's gun never wavered. His body knew the angle, the trajectory, the velocity of the missile. It was already dead before he even raised the gun.

One shot. One final moment.

His finger squeezed the trigger, the world vanishing around him as the bullet tore through the air.

The missile exploded mid-flight. *Six down.*

The battlefield fell silent.

For a moment, Ramsey stood still, his gun still raised, the echoes of the destruction vibrating in the air. The heat from the explosions still hung in the air, the smoke thick and choking. But none of it mattered. His mind was still racing, still processing. His heart was pounding, but the world around him felt like a blur.

He had done it. The final missile had been destroyed before it could even touch the ground. But what struck Ramsey wasn't the destruction, the victory, or the relief. No, it was something else. He had broken through. Not just the missiles. Not just the battle.

Ramsey had transcended the limits of the human mind. He had reached the peak.

Code Breaker.

It wasn't just his aim, his speed, or his reflexes anymore. This was something more. Something beyond the physical. Ramsey knew it then. The stakes had always been higher than just survival. It was the Heartlands. It was everything he had built, everything he had fought for. And he would do whatever it took to protect it.

In that moment, standing in the ashes of destruction, Ramsey knew that he was no longer just a man. He was a force.

Ramsey's eyes narrowed as he took aim at the helicopter in the center of the formation. Four helicopters remained, hovering in the smoke-filled sky, each one threatening everything he had built. But there was one—right in the middle—its pilot seemingly unaware that it was now the target of something far beyond human reach.

A lone shooter, one man against a sky full of steel. Impossible odds, but this was his world—this was his fight.

He steadied his hand, the barrel of his handgun aligning with the center of the cockpit. Through the smoke and flames, he could make out the pilot's face—Samir. The leader of the Red Shadows, his stoic expression a mask of determination, focused on the destruction below. He had no idea what was coming for him.

Ramsey's mind locked in, his breathing steady and calculated. His senses sharpened, every movement slowed, every calculation made with terrifying precision. A bead of sweat ran down his brow, but he didn't flinch. His focus had become an impenetrable force, an extension of the weapon in his hand.

The chaos around him seemed to fade into nothingness. The helicopters, the missiles, the fiery ruins—it all became background noise. There was only Samir now. And the shot.

Ramsey's finger hovered over the trigger, the weight of his purpose pressing down on him, and without a second of hesitation, he squeezed it.

A click.

A sound so final, so hollow, it reverberated through his ears. The gunshot that never came.

For a fraction of a second, the world stood still. He froze, as if time had caught him in its grasp. His eyes flicked to the handgun in his hand, now silent.

Empty.

All of the shots, all the missiles, all the targets destroyed in a blur of near-superhuman focus—and now the moment of truth was slipping away. His ammo had run out.

Every calculation, every instinct, every moment of precision came rushing back to him. The adrenaline, the overdrive, the tension—all of it drained from his system in an instant. His state fell back to normal, the world around him returning to its chaotic, dangerous rhythm.

He exhaled, the rush of his body's reaction settling into something more human. And in that moment, it felt like he had failed.

Ramsey's eyes darted across the battlefield, his mind still firing on all cylinders despite the sudden shock of his empty revolver. His fingers twitched, searching the ground for something—anything—that could serve as a weapon. His heartbeat thundered in his chest as he spotted a discarded rifle just out of reach, lying on the scorched earth. He lunged for it, the gravel and dirt scraping against his hands as he scrambled toward the weapon.

But he was too late.

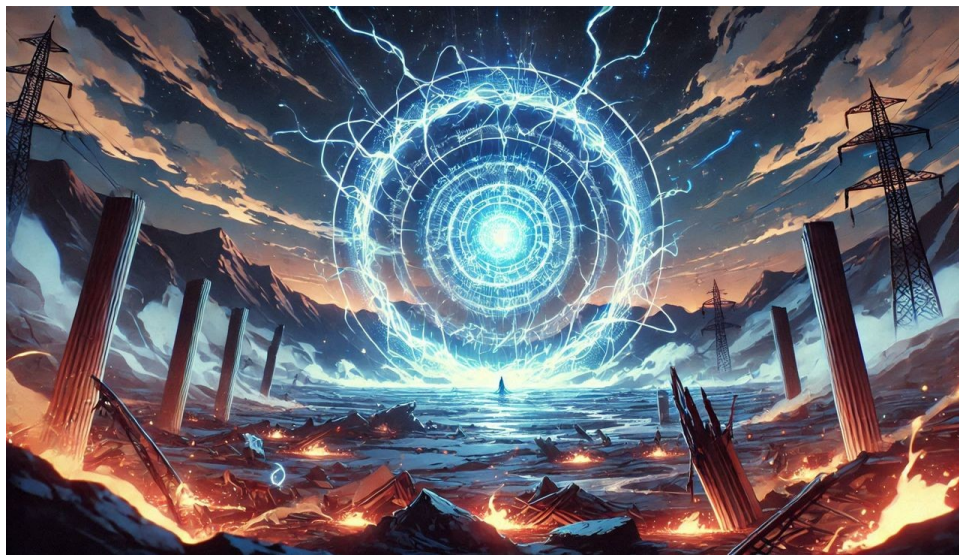
The remaining four helicopters, now locked in on his position, descended rapidly, their powerful rotors roaring as they plummeted toward the ground with terrifying speed. Their missile ports opened, and Ramsey could feel the air grow heavy with the anticipation of another round of destruction. His mind raced for a solution, but time was running out.

And then, just as the helicopters were about to fire, something unexpected happened.

A small, disk-shaped object shot through the smoke-filled air, a blur of motion that arced toward the descending helicopters. Ramsey's eyes widened in surprise as he instinctively dropped to the ground, covering his head. The object glinted in the firelight, its sleek design unfamiliar—something out of place in this chaotic battlefield.

The next moment, the world erupted in an ear-splitting blast.

A wave of electromagnetic energy pulsed through the air, a deafening hum filling the space before it was followed by a massive surge of power. The helicopters—locked in their downward descent—suddenly shuddered. The rotors spun erratically, their systems short-circuiting in a violent, electrical backlash. Sparks flew from their engines, and the sleek, menacing machines that had moments ago been a threat to his very life lost all their power in an instant.



The helicopters were no longer flying.

With a catastrophic whine of malfunctioning gears and engines, they fell out of the sky, their once-predictable motions turned into a chaotic, uncontrollable plummet. They descended at a breakneck speed, their weight now too much for the failing systems to compensate for.

It was an Specialized EMP Grenade.

The once-deadly force had been neutralized in an instant. The helicopters crashed to the earth, the deafening roar of their fall shaking the ground beneath Ramsey's feet as they collided with the dirt and rubble, sending plumes of smoke and debris into the air. The roar of engines gave way to the screech of metal, and then, all was still.

From the thick smoke, a shadow began to form—a figure moving with purpose, cutting through the haze like a specter. It was Mid-Nite, dressed in his sleek, tactical jacket, the mask concealing the cold precision in his eyes. He moved swiftly, almost seamlessly, appearing out of nowhere, as though he had been waiting for this moment all along.

"Boss!" Mid-Nite shouted, his voice cutting through the thick air, urgent and concerned. "Are you alright?"

Ramsey, still locked in the aftershock of his overdrive, slowly emerged from the trance that had overtaken him. His breath came in shallow gasps, and his mind felt distant, as though he were watching the chaos unfold from a faraway place. The burning debris, the fallen helicopters—it was all too much, too fast. But Mid-Nite's voice anchored him back to reality.

Ramsey's eyes flickered, his mind racing to process the situation. He looked up at Mid-Nite, his words strained, heavy with exhaustion. "Polo? How did you know..."

Mid-Nite didn't hesitate, his voice quick and sure. "Tiffany told me something wrong was about to happen today. She sensed the shift, something was coming. I came as fast as I could."

Ramsey exhaled, the weight of his body leaning back against the broken wall as his legs gave out beneath him. His hand reached out, steadying himself as the tension of the moment began to drain from him. "Thank you... Polo," he muttered, the words sounding almost foreign to him. "I need... I need rest..."

The adrenaline that had been surging through his veins for what felt like hours began to leave his body, and with it, the sharp clarity that had been fueling him. His vision blurred slightly, his limbs growing heavier by the second. It was as if the fight was finally over, but the cost had been steep.

Just as Ramsey's body began to relax, his muscles aching from the strain, a ragged voice cut through the air like a knife.

"YOU SON OF A BITCH!!!"

Ramsey's eyes snapped open, his senses immediately returning to the present. A figure emerged from the burning debris—Samir. Bloodied and half-burnt, he limped toward them with a look of pure, unhinged rage on his face. His clothes were torn, his skin singed, but there was no stopping him now. His hand gripped a revolver tightly, the barrel pointed directly at Ramsey, trembling with fury.



"You WILL die today!" Samir growled, his voice cracked, a man on the edge of destruction. His finger tightened on the trigger.

But before Samir could fire, Mid-Nite moved like lightning. With a flick of his wrist, he hurled one of his signature night sticks with pinpoint precision. The weapon flew through the air, hitting Samir's hand and knocking the revolver from his grip with a sickening thud.

Samir staggered back, his face twisted with rage, but before he could react, Mid-Nite was on him, his movements swift and calculated. With expert precision, he closed the distance, dropping to a crouch before Samir and using his momentum to sweep his legs out from under him. Samir hit the ground with a heavy thud, his body battered and broken, but still he fought, his hands clawing at the earth as if he could rise again.

Mid-Nite quickly moved in, pinning Samir down with a knee on his chest, his gloved hand forcing Samir's head to the ground. "Not

today," Mid-Nite hissed through gritted teeth, his voice calm but cold, like a blade about to strike.

Samir snarled, his bloodshot eyes burning with hatred. "You're nothing!" he spat, his voice barely audible between gasps for air.

Mid-Nite's grip tightened. "And yet, here you are, broken, begging for an end. The fight's over. You lost."

But just before Mid-Nite could deliver the final blow, Ramsey's voice cut through the tension like a command.

"Stop."

Mid-Nite froze, his gaze flickering up to Ramsey, who, despite the exhaustion in his voice, looked determined—implacable.

Ramsey's eyes narrowed, his voice rough but unwavering. "We don't need to finish him off. Not yet.... We need all the info we can get."

Mid-Nite stared at Ramsey for a long moment, his expression unreadable, before he gave a slow nod, loosening his grip just slightly. Samir's body heaved beneath him, his chest rising and falling with each labored breath, but he remained still, his defiance stripped away for the moment.

Ramsey's eyes never left Samir. "We're going to find out who's behind this. All of it. And you're going to help us, one way or another."

Samir let out a bitter laugh, but it was weak, hollow. "You think I have a choice?"

Ramsey stood up slowly, feeling the weight of his body sag in exhaustion, but his voice remained steady, authoritative. "You don't."

For a long beat, only the crackling of the fires could be heard, a tense silence hanging in the air like a storm waiting to break.

Mid-Nite, still crouched on Samir's chest, turned to Ramsey, his eyes glinting with quiet understanding. "What do you need me to do, Boss?"

Ramsey wiped a hand across his face, his gaze distant, the plan already formulating in his mind. "We finish this. Once and for all."

Ramsey wiped a hand across his face, his gaze distant, the plan already formulating in his mind. "We finish this. Once and for all. Take him to the safe house."

Mid-Nite gave a sharp nod, signaling his compliance as he grabbed Samir, dragging him toward the waiting vehicle. The fire still burned around them, the aftermath of the battle echoing in the distance, but Ramsey remained frozen, staring at the wreckage. His body ached, his mind still racing with the weight of everything that had just transpired.

The war was far from over. This was just the beginning.

With a deep, slow breath, Ramsey turned and walked toward the shadows. His body moved with purpose, but inside, he could feel the toll of the day settling in—exhaustion, pain, and the creeping sense of dread that would not leave him.

And that is how **Day 1** ended.

Day 2

The door creaked open, revealing a stark white room, silent but for the hum of a single overhead light. In the center, Samir sat shackled to a steel chair, his body a tapestry of bandages and burns. His left eye was swollen shut, his breaths labored. Yet, even in his broken state, there was defiance in his glare.

Footsteps echoed as Ramsey entered the room, his silhouette sharp and imposing. He moved without haste, every step deliberate, his coat swaying faintly with the rhythm. He stopped just short of the table, arms crossed, his gaze piercing through the haze of defiance in Samir's eyes.

"Samir," Ramsey said, his voice smooth but cold, like a blade sliding from its sheath. "How are you holding up?"

Samir gritted his teeth, a sneer forming on his battered face. "Screw you, 'The Boss,' or whatever you call yourself! YOU ALL WILL PAY FOR THIS!" His voice cracked, equal parts rage and desperation.

Ramsey chuckled softly, the sound low and unsettling. "Now, now, let's not be so dramatic. Let bygones be bygones, hmm? You give me what I need, and I'll make sure you leave this alive."

Samir laughed bitterly, the sound echoing in the empty room.

"Alive? You think death scares me? I am *Red Shadow*! I MADE the Red Shadows! I've got no fear, least of all for you!"

Ramsey's expression didn't waver. If anything, his smirk deepened, as if Samir's bravado amused him. He took a step closer, leaning slightly forward, his voice dropping to a whisper that carried weight far heavier than volume could. "No fear, you say? Except, perhaps, the fear of losing Leeds. Modern times are unkind to relics, aren't they?"

Samir's sneer faltered for just a moment, but Ramsey caught it. He always caught it.

"You," Samir hissed, his voice laced with venom.

Ramsey straightened, tilting his head ever so slightly. "Let's not waste each other's time, Samir. I don't enjoy this any more than you do, but I'm a man of efficiency. The sooner you give me what I want, the sooner I can set you on your merry course." His voice turned colder, more commanding. "So tell me... what are the other gang leaders planning?"

Samir spat on the floor, a weak attempt at defiance. "What makes you think I'll tell you anything? You're bluffing. I've been in this game longer than you've been breathing."

Ramsey's smile disappeared, replaced by an expression so devoid of emotion it could have chilled the room. He slowly reached into his coat pocket, pulling out a small object—a simple switchblade. He flicked it open, the metallic *click* echoing ominously in the quiet room. He turned the blade in his hand, inspecting it with a detached curiosity before speaking.

"You see, Samir," Ramsey began, his voice calm, clinical, "people like you—men of pride, men of legacy—you're not scared of death. No, you're scared of irrelevance. Of being forgotten. Of watching everything you built crumble into nothing. That's what truly terrifies you. And me? I can make that happen. Piece by piece, brick by brick, I'll dismantle everything you hold dear until there's not even a shadow left of the Red Shadows."

Samir's bravado faltered. The sneer twitched, his shoulders stiffened. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair, the chains clinking softly.

Ramsey leaned in, his voice a lethal whisper. "Or... you could talk. Tell me what I need to know, and maybe—just maybe—I'll let you walk out of this room with your legacy intact. Your choice."

The room fell silent, the weight of Ramsey's words pressing down on Samir like a vice. For the first time, the defiant gang leader looked uncertain.

Samir let out a weary laugh, his chest heaving with the effort. "Screw it. I ain't got nothing to lose anymore," he muttered, his voice carrying a mixture of defiance and resignation. "Fine. You want to know the truth? I don't know a damn thing about the other gang leaders. I was only in touch with Luigi, and even he was just a scapegoat for my plans."

Ramsey tilted his head, his sharp eyes narrowing. His voice, now colder than ever, sliced through the air. "Hah, really? You expect me to believe that?"

Samir shrugged, a bitter smile creeping onto his face. "Believe what you want. I'm not here to convince you, 'Boss.' I only say what I know. Take it or leave it."

Ramsey stepped closer, his presence suffocating, the blade in his hand glinting ominously under the sterile light. "Then I guess you're of no use to me anymore," he said softly, the finality in his tone making Samir flinch ever so slightly.

But then Samir grinned, his teeth streaked with blood. "How about I tell you something you *won't* believe?"

Ramsey paused, his brows furrowing ever so slightly. "What do you mean?" he asked, his voice low, cautious.

Samir's grin widened as he leaned back in his chair, savoring the moment. "Hyram," he said, almost chuckling. "He's a scapegoat too."

Ramsey froze. His mask of control slipped for the briefest moment before he quickly regained it. "What?" His voice carried an edge now, dangerous and sharp.

Samir nodded, his smile turning into a smug smirk. "None of us answer to him. We make him think we do. Make him believe he's the mastermind, the one pulling the strings, the reason we all allied our forces. But the truth?" Samir leaned forward as far as his restraints would allow, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "He's just a pawn in the grand scheme of things... and he doesn't even know it yet. Isn't that funny?"



Ramsey's jaw clenched, his mind racing as he processed the revelation. "If Hiram's just a pawn, then who? Who's behind all of

this?" His tone was calm, but there was an undercurrent of urgency, of tightly controlled fury.

Samir's laugh was dry and humorless. "Someone bigger. Someone from the... government."

The word hung in the air, heavy and suffocating. Ramsey's eyes darkened as his fists tightened at his sides. His voice was a low growl now, barely controlled. "You're lying."

Samir shook his head, his smugness replaced with an unsettling calm. "Am I? Think about it, Boss. Think about how we've always been one step ahead, how your every move's been countered, every ally of yours systematically torn apart. You think that's the work of gangs? No. This is bigger than all of us. And you're caught in the middle of it, just like Hiram."

"Who is that? How did they contact you?" Ramsey demanded, his tone leaving no room for evasion.

Samir's smug grin faltered for a moment before he shrugged, leaning back against the chair despite his injuries. "I don't know," he admitted, his voice carrying a tinge of frustration. "He kept his identity hidden. Could be a he, a she—we never knew. His voice was robotic, distorted. No name, no face."

Ramsey's jaw tightened. He stepped forward, his presence casting a shadow over the restrained man. "And yet you all followed someone like that? A ghost?"

Samir let out a dry laugh, wincing as the movement strained his injuries. "You don't understand, Boss. He didn't just bark orders and expect us to fall in line. He gave us supplies. Weapons. Money. Everything we needed to keep the empire afloat. It was his way of earning our trust. And it worked."

Ramsey's mind raced. His fists clenched at his sides as he growled, "How long has this been going on?"

Samir hesitated, as if weighing the value of his answer, before responding. "A couple of weeks, maybe a month. He's the one who told us to meet up with Hiram and play along with his plans. Said it was 'necessary for the bigger picture.' Everything Hiram thought he was orchestrating? It was all part of this shadow's game."

Ramsey's eyes narrowed, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. "You're saying that even before this, Hiram's actions... might have been manipulated?"

Samir chuckled darkly, his teeth stained with dried blood. "Might? I'd bet my life on it. The moves we've been making, the alliances, the timing—it all points back to him. Or her. Or... whatever they are."

Ramsey stood still, his gaze locked onto Samir as if trying to extract more answers through sheer will. His voice was low, almost to himself. "No way..."

Samir's grin returned, wider this time, his eyes gleaming with something between satisfaction and malice. "Oh, yes way, Boss. You

think you're the one pulling the strings? The mastermind? You're just as much a puppet as Hiram. You just don't see the strings yet."

Ramsey stepped closer, his voice sharp and cutting. "If you're lying to me, Samir—"

Samir interrupted, his tone mocking. "What? You'll kill me? Go ahead. Do it. But it won't change the fact that you've been played. All of us have. The only difference is, I know it now, and you're still scrambling in the dark."

Ramsey's face hardened, but before he could respond, Samir leaned forward, the restraints biting into his burned flesh. "You think you're the predator, Ramsey," he hissed, his voice dripping with venom. "But in this game? You're the prey."

The words hung in the air like a noose tightening around Ramsey. For a moment, silence filled the room, broken only by the faint hum of the fluorescent light above. Ramsey turned sharply, his hand gripping the door handle as if grounding himself. His steps were measured, his mind a whirlwind of revelations and suspicions.

"Good luck, Boss," Samir called out, his voice echoing with malicious glee. "You're gonna need it."

Ramsey paused for a fraction of a second but didn't turn back. He opened the door and stepped through, leaving Samir behind, his mocking laughter lingering like a ghost in the white room.

Ramsey leaned against the cold, concrete wall outside the interrogation room, the weight of Samir's words pressing heavily on him. The dimly lit hallway felt suffocating, a tangible reminder of the shadows creeping into every corner of his operation. Cheng stood nearby, her arms crossed, her sharp eyes scanning his face.

"You don't think that's true, do you?" Cheng asked, her voice steady but laced with concern.

Ramsey exhaled slowly, rubbing his temples. "It might be possible," he admitted, the words tasting bitter as they left his mouth.

Cheng's brow furrowed, her voice dropping lower. "If it is... then we're dealing with something far worse than we imagined. This isn't just about the gangs anymore. It's about something much bigger—something none of us are prepared for."

Ramsey straightened, his expression hardening. "One step at a time, Cheng. First, we need to wrap up everything with Heartlands. If the foundation crumbles, none of this will matter."

She nodded, her jaw tightening. "What's the plan?"

Ramsey's eyes flickered with determination. "We have the access card. Hiram needs it. All we need from him are the Heartland documents. An exchange."

Cheng tilted her head, skepticism flashing in her eyes. "So we set up a meeting?"

Ramsey's lips curved into a grim smile. "More than that. Contact the elusive supplier. Let him know we'll be giving the access card to Hiram, just like he originally planned."

Cheng fell into step beside him, her boots clicking softly against the floor. "I'll make the call," she said after a moment, her voice firm. "But this plan feels like walking into a trap, Boss."

Ramsey stopped briefly at the end of the hall, turning to face her. His gaze met hers, unyielding but filled with trust. "Then let's make sure we're the ones who set it."

Cheng watched him disappear into the night, the cool air brushing against her face as she pulled out her phone to start the chain of events. Meanwhile, Ramsey stepped outside, the stars above seeming distant and indifferent, a stark contrast to the storm brewing beneath.

He clenched his fists, his knuckles turning white as memories resurfaced. The Heartlands, his creation, had always been a part of the plan. A double life. A shadow that swallowed his true self. Twenty years spent building an empire, not for power or wealth, but to dismantle it from within. A plan born from duty, sacrifice, and a promise to himself—a promise to clean the filth from the streets of Leeds once and for all.

But last time, he'd faltered. He let sentiment creep in.

Ramsey rubbed his hand over his bald head, a habit he'd picked up over the years whenever the weight of his thoughts bore down on him. In the glass door leading back inside, his reflection stared back at him—a man worn down by decades of lies and sacrifice. He didn't see the feared boss of the Heartlands Mob but a man cracked and weathered by the life he had chosen. Last time, he'd wanted to savor the bonds he'd built with his men, the twisted sense of belonging that came with it. He'd even hoped—foolishly—that Ahnaf would take up the mantle of dismantling what he had built. That someone else could finish what he started.

He turned his gaze back to the city, his jaw tightening. That had been his mistake. His weakness.

This time, there would be no hesitation. No reliance on others. The Heartland documents were the key to everything—proof of every dirty deal, every betrayal, every thread that tied the city's underworld together. He had let them slip through his fingers once, and the consequences had nearly destroyed him.

Not this time.

He moved to the edge of the terrace, gripping the cold metal railing as if grounding himself against the weight of his decision. The night air pressed heavy against him, the distant sirens and muffled city noise fading as his resolve solidified. He reached into his pocket and retrieved his gun, checking its chamber with the precision of a man who'd done it a thousand times.

"This time," he murmured to himself, his voice swallowed by the wind, "I finish what I started. No distractions. No mistakes."

His gaze flickered to the old photograph tucked in his pocket—a relic of a life long gone. He didn't pull it out, didn't need to. He already knew the image etched into his mind: a younger, hopeful version of himself, standing with a team that had long since scattered. Their idealism had faded, but his mission hadn't.

He straightened his jacket, his resolve hardening with each passing second. This was it. The endgame.

As he stepped back toward the glass door, his thoughts were clear, his path set. He wasn't just going to bring down the Heartlands. He was going to burn it to ashes, along with anyone standing in his way.

Day 3

The Heartland farm mansion, once a symbol of power, was slowly being rebuilt. The wreckage from the attack on Day 1 was still evident in the broken walls and shattered windows, but the determined men of the mob were at work, repairing the damage. Heavy equipment rumbled in the background as workers replaced sections of the roof, cleared debris, and sealed cracks. The air was thick with the smell of fresh paint and wood, the mansion slowly returning to its former grandeur. Yet beneath the surface, there was an undeniable tension—an atmosphere where trust was fragile, and every member of Heartlands knew things would never be the same.

A knock at the door broke Ramsey's thoughts.

"Who?" he called, his voice steady but guarded.

"Boss, it's me," came the soft reply.

Ramsey paused for a moment before speaking again. "Hiram... well, come in."

The door creaked open, and Hiram entered, his usual cheery demeanor replaced by something Ramsey had never seen before: genuine fear and vulnerability. The man was clearly troubled, his steps hesitant as he approached.

Hiram stood before Ramsey, his face drawn with regret. Without warning, he knelt down, his shoulders shaking as sobs wracked his frame. "Boss... I... I can't believe what you did back there... protecting us... all of us. You showed us why we follow you. I've never seen anything like it, not with this much strategy... this much precision." His voice trembled as he continued, his words heavy with emotion. "I'm sorry, Boss. I—I failed you. I wanted to take you down, push you out, thinking I could do better... but you... you deserve this place more than anyone."

His hands pressed into the floor as he bowed his head lower. "I was blind, Boss. I was a fool. All this time, trying to tear you down, never understanding the depth of your vision. You've built this... you've made this empire what it is. I should've been on your side the entire time."

Hiram's sobs grew louder as the weight of his guilt consumed him. "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. You've been fighting for us—for the Heartlands—and I... I didn't see it. But now, now I understand. I don't deserve to be part of this anymore, not if I was ever going to betray you."

Ramsey remained silent, watching as the man he had once trusted and now suspected lay himself bare in front of him. Hiram continued, voice cracking with regret.

"I don't expect you to forgive me, Boss... But I beg you—let me prove myself to you. I'll do anything. I'll make it right. I'll rebuild everything I've broken, every decision I've made against you. Please, just give me a chance to make things right."

There was a long pause. Hiram was still kneeling, his face flushed with both the sobs and the humiliation. Ramsey stared down at him, eyes cold and calculating, trying to read the sincerity in his actions.

Ramsey's voice was low, steady, cutting through the quiet like a knife. "Then let's start from the beginning. Who gave you the Heartland documents back?"

Hiram's hands trembled as he clutched at his knees, his face flushed, beads of sweat dotting his forehead. "I received an anonymous text message. 13th of August. A coordinate with a picture of the documents attached. I went there. And along with the documents, there was a message." His breath hitched, and he paused, his voice cracking as he continued.

"All the pieces are in play. Execute your plan, or you will be executed." Hiram swallowed hard, unable to look up. "Boss... I have been planning to overthrow you for years, and I let no one know. But someone knew. And I had no other choice. Fear took over."

Ramsey stood motionless, watching the man before him, his mind calculating every word, every gesture.

Hiram wiped his brow, his voice trembling with the weight of his confession. "I started writing my plans, filling more pages in the document like I always did, finding the best possible way. And then... I broke through. But I made a mistake."

Ramsey leaned in slightly, his expression unreadable. "What mistake?"

Hiram's eyes darted around the room, as if trying to escape the gravity of his own words. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Javier. He saw me. At that point, everyone thought I was on vacation. But he saw me in the city, transporting the documents back to Leeds Vault. He confronted me in the parking lot. Caught me acting suspicious. Heh, he was always the cautious one. He demanded to know what was in my suitcase—the Heartland documents. We had a small falling out, and the suitcase fell. It opened, and... he saw my plans to overthrow you."

Hiram continued, his voice low, almost pleading. "He quickly took it all and ran toward his car. I wasn't fast enough to stop him. He took off."

A silence followed, thick with the weight of the revelation. Ramsey's mind raced, replaying the events in his head, piecing together the fragments of the story.

"So that's what Javier meant in the call," Ramsey murmured, his tone distant. "When he said that I wouldn't believe it."

Hiram nodded, his eyes now avoiding Ramsey's, guilt and fear washing over him like a tide. "And then I called Marco... to intercept Javier. To... stop him. And he crashed into him." His voice faltered as the memory of the collision seemed to weigh down on him.

Ramsey's voice was a quiet thunder, barely audible, but each word struck with precision, sending a jolt through the air. His eyes remained locked on Hiram, watching the man squirm in the uncomfortable silence, the weight of each accusation hanging like a sword ready to fall.

"And by the end of the week, you killed him in cold blood in the hospital and texted me with the live feed of someone entering the hospital," Ramsey's words cut through the tension.

Hiram's eyes widened, his breath catching in his throat. "What? I never did any of that... What do you mean?" he stammered, confusion twisting his features.

Ramsey leaned forward, his voice low, laced with a dangerous calm. "You mean to say you didn't kill Javier at the hospital?" His eyes

never left Hiram's, searching for any flicker of guilt, any sign that might break the man's carefully constructed mask.

Hiram shifted, a nervous sweat beginning to bead on his forehead. "Boss... all I knew was that he was in a coma. And there was no guarantee his mental state would ever return to normal, even if he recovered. So, I never thought about it afterward!"

Ramsey's gaze darkened. The lies. The evasion. "Okay, then. What about the bomb in the shipment?"

A flicker of hesitation crossed Hiram's face, but it was brief. He wasn't prepared for the next question. "Oh yes, that was my doing..." he admitted, his voice shaking slightly, but a twisted sense of pride leaking through his confession.

Ramsey's eyes hardened. "And the poison that was meant for me... in the Cakewalks café. Was that your doing also?"

Hiram's face drained of color. "What? No... I did not try any such acts of poisoning you in any café," he protested, his voice rising in disbelief.

Ramsey's lips curled into a cold, humorless smile. "Haha... seems like everyone wants to kill me these days." He leaned back slightly, letting the weight of that statement hang in the air, before his gaze narrowed further, his voice colder than before. "One more question. Did you perhaps call the cops on me in any safehouse?"

Hiram's eyes darted around, panic creeping in as the walls of truth closed in around him. "Safehouse? Not on you exactly... In our last safehouse, I was the one to give a tip to the police for the raid," he admitted, his voice faltering, knowing the game had changed.

Ramsey's eyes burned with the realization. *The raid*. Hiram had set him up. A piece of the puzzle clicked into place, but the pieces were still shifting in ways Ramsey wasn't sure he fully understood.

"Any other raids you planned before that?" Ramsey pressed, his voice sharp, cutting through Hiram's defenses.

Hiram's hands trembled, but he quickly recovered. "No... that was the only one."

Ramsey's expression was unreadable, the silence in the room growing thicker with every passing second. He leaned in, his eyes never leaving Hiram's as he finally spoke, his voice barely above a whisper. "That changes a lot of things."

Ramsey leaned back in his chair, his mind heavy with the words that had been exchanged. The tension in the room pressed in, thick and suffocating. The silence that followed Hiram's last desperate statement hung like a storm cloud, ready to break. Ramsey's cold, calculating eyes never left the man kneeling before him. He studied Hiram with the precision of a predator.

Finally, Ramsey spoke, his voice devoid of emotion, but every word sharp, cutting through the stillness.

"Lastly, I don't want to waste time asking you about why you lost the support of the rival gangs. I already know you made them invest in something... something you lost."

Hiram's voice cracked, filled with panic and shame. "Yes... I ordered an access card from the elusive supplier. Someone stole it! My men say it was Mid-Nite... but how can that be? You killed him yourself..."

His words trailed off, panic rising in his chest. Ramsey's eyes narrowed, watching him squirm, waiting for the next piece of the puzzle to fall into place.

As if on cue, a ping sounded from Ramsey's phone, slicing through the tension like a blade. Instinctively, Ramsey reached for it, his fingers brushing over the screen with practiced precision. He unlocked it, the light from the screen illuminating his face as he read the message. It was simple, but it chilled him to the bone.

The anonymous number flashed across the screen, delivering its message with unsettling efficiency:

"The Heartlands Document for the Access Card. Tower 52. Tomorrow evening."



Ramsey remained still, his eyes fixed on the words, his mind already spinning with the implications. He felt the pieces falling into place, the last steps of a carefully laid trap that he hadn't known was coming until now. Hiram's fate was tied to this message—tied to the answers Ramsey had been searching for all along.

Without taking his eyes off the phone, Ramsey's voice was calm, almost too calm, as he spoke. "Well, looks like we have the answer to our problems now."

Hiram's face twisted with disbelief. His breath hitched as the weight of the situation finally settled in. He looked up at Ramsey, desperate, his voice shaking as he scrambled for some form of redemption.

"Boss... I didn't know any of this was going to happen. I didn't plan for it. I've been caught in this mess for too long... But you have to understand, I was just trying to keep my position safe. I thought I could control it all. But now... now it's all out of my hands. Someone's pulling strings. Someone's using me."

Ramsey's gaze remained unwavering, his voice cutting through the room like a knife. "You've made your bed, Hiram. Now, you'll lie in it. I don't want to hear excuses. You played your part, and now the pieces are falling into place."

Hiram's hands trembled, his face flushed with the sting of shame. He understood now, fully, the consequences of his actions. His world was unraveling, and he had no control over it. But Ramsey wasn't finished with him. There were still words to be said. Still something more that needed to be done.

"Go clean yourself," Ramsey commanded, his voice low and unyielding. "I forgive you... for now. But remember this, Hiram... next time... you won't be so lucky."

Hiram, his head bowed in shame, nodded quickly. He wiped his eyes, trying to regain his composure. He stood shakily, his legs unsteady beneath him, and turned toward the door. But Ramsey's

words lingered in the room, heavy and unrelenting. The door clicked shut behind Hiram, leaving Ramsey alone with his thoughts.

All the cards were in place. Ramsey knew it. The pieces had moved, and now it was time to finish the game.

He glanced out the window one final time as the last rays of the sun dipped below the horizon. His gaze hardened. The men working below him, rebuilding the ruins of the Heartlands, were oblivious to the truth. None of it would matter in the end. The endgame had arrived. And this time, no one would stand in his way.

Day 4

The journey to Tower 52 passed in near silence. The soft hum of the engine was the only sound breaking the oppressive quiet. Ramsey drove, his hands steady on the wheel, eyes scanning the road ahead, focused but distant. Hiram sat beside him, fidgeting restlessly with the briefcase, the tension in his body palpable.

"You think this mole can be trusted?" Hiram's voice broke the silence, his unease evident as he glanced over at Ramsey. His words carried the weight of his nerves, an unspoken fear of being double-crossed.

Ramsey's eyes remained fixed on the road, his voice calm as always. "Trust has nothing to do with it," he said, his tone as flat as ever. "We're here to play their game, until we've won."

Hiram swallowed hard, nodding, but his fingers never stopped trembling around the briefcase. His mind raced with thoughts of what could go wrong, but he knew better than to speak them aloud. His boss had a way of handling situations that made things look easy—too easy.

"Yeah, but what if they've got a trick up their sleeve?" Hiram pressed, his voice tinged with doubt. "What if this whole thing's a setup?"

Ramsey glanced briefly at him, his expression unreadable. "If it was, we'd already be dead, Hiram." He said it with such finality that Hiram felt the words settle in his chest like a cold weight. "The mole's been in this game longer than we have. He knows the risks, and so do we. That's why we don't let our guard down."

Hiram's grip on the briefcase tightened. "I know, I know. Just... something doesn't sit right with me."

Ramsey's eyes flickered to the rearview mirror, scanning for any sign of a tail. "Trust your instincts, but not your paranoia. Focus on the plan. That's how we'll win."

Hiram leaned back in his seat, trying to calm his nerves, but the thoughts kept gnawing at him. "What do you think's in the document, anyway? Something worth all this trouble?"

Ramsey didn't answer immediately, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the road ahead. "Does it matter?" he replied finally. "The point isn't what's in it. It's what we can use it for."

Hiram frowned, his curiosity piqued. "And what's that?"

Ramsey's gaze shifted back to the road, the setting sun casting long shadows across his face. "Power. Information. Leverage. Same as it ever was." He glanced at Hiram, a rare hint of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "And when we have it, we can do whatever we want."

Hiram let out a low whistle, absorbing the weight of those words. "Yeah, I guess you're right. But I still feel like we're stepping into a hornet's nest."

Ramsey's expression hardened. "Every step forward in this world is stepping into something. If you're not ready to face that, then you're in the wrong game."

As the sun sank beneath the horizon, Tower 52 rose in the distance, a dark monolith against the fading light. The building's silhouette cast long shadows over the empty streets, the windows reflecting the last vestiges of daylight, making the structure look almost alive. A cold wind swept through the city, and with it, a sense of inevitability.



Ramsey slowed the car as they neared the building, parking at the edge of the vacant lot. He glanced at Hiram, who was already gripping the briefcase so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

"Stay focused," Ramsey said, his voice a low command. "This goes smoothly, and we leave with what we came for. No distractions."

Hiram nodded, swallowing down the lump in his throat. As they stepped out of the car, the sound of their footsteps echoed in the silence. Ramsey's eyes scanned the area, alert to every movement, every sound. There was no room for error.

Inside Tower 52: The Exchange

The lobby of Tower 52 was eerily quiet. The building, once a beacon of industry, now stood as a hollow shell, abandoned and decaying. The air was thick with dust, the walls marked with years of neglect. As Ramsey and Hiram moved through the lobby, a speaker

mounted on the far wall crackled to life, its distorted voice cutting through the silence.

"Proceed to the 15th floor. Follow the red arrows. Bring the document."

Ramsey didn't flinch. He nodded at Hiram and gestured for him to follow, moving with deliberate purpose. No hesitation. They both knew the stakes now.

Hiram, his nerves gnawing at him, glanced at Ramsey as they began their ascent up the stairs. "What if this is a trap? What if—"

"It's not," Ramsey interrupted, his voice low and calm, the finality in his words leaving no room for doubt. "Trust me."

The words hung between them as they climbed, and for the first time, Hiram fell silent, his nerves momentarily stilled by Ramsey's unshakable confidence.

They began their ascent, the stairwell stretching upward, dim lights casting long shadows on the walls. Ramsey led the way, his movements measured, while Hiram kept close behind, his heart pounding in his chest. At the 5th floor, Ramsey stopped briefly, eyes narrowing as he scanned the hallway.

"We stay together," Ramsey muttered, his voice steady. "If anything feels off—"

"We're out," Hiram finished, his voice strained but resolute.

They moved forward, their footsteps echoing through the abandoned halls. The red arrows guided their path, the flickering lights adding to the haunting atmosphere. As they approached the 10th floor, the corridor split unexpectedly—one arrow pointing left, the other right. Ramsey stopped, his instincts kicking in.

"Stay alert," he said, his eyes flicking from one direction to the other. "Something's off."

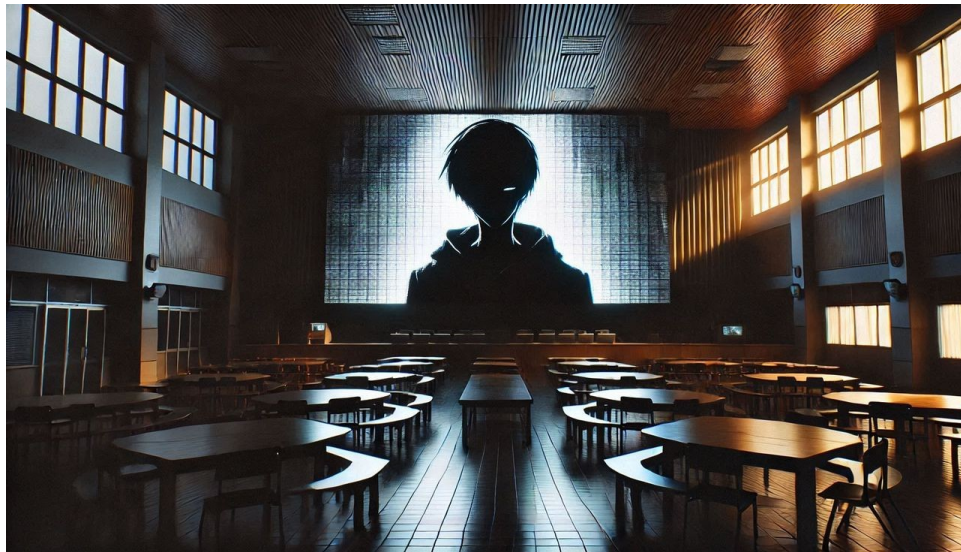
Without hesitation, they followed the left corridor, the arrow leading them toward a stairwell door. A draft of cold air rushed through the cracked door, sending a chill down Hiram's spine. They continued up, the silence deafening, until they reached the 13th floor. The space here was vast, empty, save for a single chair facing the wall. The red arrow on the floor pointed toward a narrow hallway.

"Room 15A," the distorted voice crackled through the speaker, a cold command.

Ramsey exchanged a brief glance with Hiram. They had no choice but to follow.

The hallway seemed to close in around them as they moved deeper into the building. Every step felt heavier, the weight of the briefcase pressing down on Hiram. As they reached the door to Room 15A.

They moved toward the room, and as Ramsey stepped inside, his eyes immediately went to the large TV screen mounted on the wall beside the table. The screen flickered to life, revealing only a black silhouette, its features obscured in the shadow. The eerie glow from the screen contrasted sharply against the dim lighting of the room, and the low hum of a flickering light overhead was the only sound.



"Place the document on the table," a voice, muffled by distortion, echoed from the speakers.

Hiram didn't hesitate, setting the briefcase down carefully, his hands trembling slightly. As he stepped back, Ramsey's eyes never left the screen. Something about this whole exchange felt too clean, too perfect—something was off. There was no figure in the room, only the haunting presence of the shadow on the screen, its outline shifting with the static.

The screen remained dark, but the voice came again, sharper this time. "The card is inside. The combination is 3-2-6-1."

Hiram rushed forward, his fingers shaking as he entered the code into the safe. The heavy metal door swung open, revealing the Access Card—shiny and untouched, glowing with the promise of power. Hiram grabbed it, a wide grin breaking across his face. "We've got it!" he exclaimed, his voice filled with triumph.

Ramsey's eyes flickered to the screen, his instincts still on edge. He studied the shifting silhouette, trying to sense any sign of emotion, but the figure remained still, a dark shape. "You've gone to a lot of trouble for this document," Ramsey said, his voice casual but his eyes never leaving the screen. "What's in it for you?"

There was no immediate response. The shadow shifted slightly, but the figure remained silent. After a long moment, the voice returned, this time colder, with a hint of amusement. "What's in it for me? Let's just say I'm not in the business of charity. You want the card, but you're too focused on what's in front of you. You never bother to ask the right questions."

Ramsey's hand instinctively moved toward his gun. His posture tightened, and his eyes scanned the room, looking for any sign of movement, any hint of danger. "I don't take kindly to cryptic answers," he said, his voice laced with suspicion.

The silhouette on the screen shifted again, its edges blurring and twisting unnervingly. The voice came once more, colder now, as

though the figure were savoring every word. "I'm not here to answer your questions, Ramsey. I'm here to deliver. Whether you leave this room with the card or not, that's up to you."

The figure's last words hung in the air, trailing off as the shadow on the screen seemed to fade, becoming indistinct. The room seemed to grow colder, the silence more oppressive.

Without another word, the shadow disappeared entirely from the screen, leaving only the faint flicker of static behind. Ramsey turned toward Hiram, who was still clutching the card with a nervous energy, as though the room itself had thickened around them.

A long silence stretched between them. Ramsey's gaze remained on the now-dark screen, his mind racing. The message wasn't lost on him. He could feel the weight of it, the subtle but undeniable threat lurking beneath the words.

"That wasn't what I expected," Ramsey muttered, his voice tight with suspicion.

Hiram glanced back at the now empty screen, his eyes wide with uncertainty. He quickly stuffed the card into his coat, his voice shaking. "Boss, I... I don't know what just happened. But we've got what we came for. Let's get out of here."

Ramsey didn't move immediately, his gaze lingering on the room's dim corners, the static on the screen. His instincts screamed at him to stay alert, but there was nothing more to be found here. The

unease gnawed at him, refusing to be ignored. But he obliged and left the room with Hiram

As they descended the stairs, Hiram practically bounced with excitement, the Access Card now clutched tightly in his hand. "This changes everything, Boss! We're back in the game!"

Ramsey's expression remained unreadable. His mind was elsewhere, his thoughts lingering on the exchange that had gone too smoothly. The pieces weren't adding up. Back in the game? Or deeper in it than before?

They reached the ground floor, stepping back into the darkened night. Ramsey's gaze swept over the surroundings, assessing the quiet street. His eyes met Hiram's eager look, but Ramsey remained still, his posture rigid. His voice was measured, controlled.

Hiram looked at the card in his hand, the excitement practically radiating off of him. "Well, looks like it all went smoothly, huh? We're set."

Ramsey nodded slowly, but his mind was miles away. "Believe so... What are you gonna do with the card?"

Hiram grinned, the thrill of the moment shining through his usual jovial demeanor. "Use it to pay back all the other rival gangs. You'll see. We've got leverage now. We make the call, they'll listen."

Ramsey's lips twitched slightly, but he didn't smile. "Well... if you think you can, then who am I to disagree?"

Hiram's eyes gleamed with ambition as he glanced at Ramsey, like a man finally seeing his way to the top. "This is it, Boss. We control the game now. You, me... we take the reins from everyone else who thought they could run things."

Ramsey's eyes narrowed slightly. He didn't reply immediately, his mind turning over the possibilities. "Maybe. But the game's always changing, Hiram. Don't get too comfortable."

Hiram waved off Ramsey's warning with a confident chuckle. "Come on, Boss. The cards are in our hands now. You know the power we hold. Everyone's going to line up when we make our move."

Ramsey's hand rested casually on his belt as he walked beside Hiram, but his gaze shifted slightly to the shadows around them. Ramsey smiled slightly, the edges of his lips pulling up as he glanced at Hiram. Everything was moving *too* smoothly. Too perfectly. There was always a catch.

But for now, he said nothing, the smile on his face flickering like a brief moment of satisfaction. *Too smoothly...*

"Alright, Hiram," Ramsey said finally, his voice more measured. "Let's see how this all plays out."

They Left as the night grew darker, a slow smile crossed his face,

and his thoughts twisted into something darker. Everything was going too smoothly—just as he planned.

Day 5

The first light of dawn broke over Leeds, painting the city in muted tones of orange and gray. A faint mist clung to the streets, a veil of quiet stillness before the world fully woke. As the sunlight stretched across the skyline, Ramsey stepped out of the Heartlands hideout, his boots clicking with steady precision against the cold concrete. His silhouette was sharp, his presence commanding. The sharp, tailored suit he wore seemed to swallow the morning light as he moved, a man on a mission.

Standing by the door was Cheng, holding a briefcase in her hand—the Heartland documents.



Cheng glanced up at Ramsey with a subtle smirk, her eyes scanning the early morning. "All according to plan, huh?"

Ramsey's lips curled into a faint smile as he glanced at her, his voice laced with admiration. "As always. I must say, you nailed the role of the silhouette figure. The robotic voice... the screen... Hah, it was so believable."

Cheng raised an eyebrow, a slight chuckle escaping her. "You say that, but you acted like a pro yourself. For a moment, I thought you were gonna break the screen with how convincing you were."

Ramsey's smile grew sharper as he adjusted his cuffs, his confidence unwavering. "What can I say? I'm good at what I do."

Just then, a car pulled up, and the driver's side door opened, revealing Tiffany with a cold, composed expression. "So this is it, huh?" she said, her voice steady as she glanced between them.

Ramsey nodded, his gaze unwavering as he looked ahead, the weight of years of planning behind him. "This is it. The moment we've all been waiting for. For twenty years."

Cheng stepped into the back seat of the car, settling herself with a determined air, the briefcase still firmly in her grip. "Well, let's not waste any more time then," she said, her tone betraying no hesitation.

Ramsey followed Cheng into the car, but as he closed the door, his eyes flicked toward the safehouse. Polo stood by the door, watching them with a mixture of apprehension and resignation.



"Polo..." Ramsey's voice was low, a touch of something unspoken hanging between them.

Polo, shifting uneasily, glanced over his shoulder before stepping forward slightly. His expression was conflicted, but his voice was steady. "So, this is where it ends, huh? Heartlands wiped out?"

Ramsey's eyes met Polo's, his gaze unwavering as he responded, "In a few days, yes... Do you have any regrets?"

There was a brief silence. Polo looked down for a moment, his shoulders tense. Then, with a sigh, he spoke, his voice almost too

quiet. "None. I never liked the life of crime... Marco... well, he was the only one pushing me into it."

Ramsey's lips tightened into a line, his expression hardening. "We know that."

Polo swallowed, his eyes shifting between the ground and Ramsey, unsure of how to proceed. "So, what's gonna happen with me?"

Ramsey regarded Polo for a long moment, his eyes narrowing slightly as he took a step closer. "Well... What if I come back with the police and arrest you?" His tone was calm, almost testing.

Polo held Ramsey's gaze for a beat, a quiet resolve settling over him. He shrugged, his voice steady as he spoke. "I'd accept my fate. I know my wrongdoings, and I'm not running away."

Ramsey smirked, but there was no warmth in it. He stepped back, his voice laced with a cold amusement. "Heh... then you'll have to wait and see what plans I have for you. Maybe you won't be seeing me again... or maybe you will. Goodbye, Polo."



With that, Ramsey turned away, his steps purposeful as he climbed into the car. Polo stood silently, watching as the car began to pull away. The door slammed shut behind them with finality.

Tiffany's hands gripped the steering wheel as she glanced at Ramsey through the rearview mirror. "You think he'll go through with it?"

Ramsey's gaze stayed fixed on the road ahead, the city slowly fading behind them. His voice was steady, his tone calm but with an edge to it. "Polo? I don't think he ever had the stomach for this life.

But he's too far gone now. If he really wants redemption... he'll have to find it on his own."

Cheng shifted in the back seat, tapping her fingers rhythmically against the briefcase. Her gaze was distant, lost in thought. "And the others?" she asked quietly, the weight of their situation beginning to settle in.

Ramsey didn't look at her, but his words were clear, almost disinterested. "We'll deal with them soon enough. But Polo's different. He's always been... an afterthought. Not the one I'd have chosen for this kind of thing. But now, it's up to him how he ends the story."

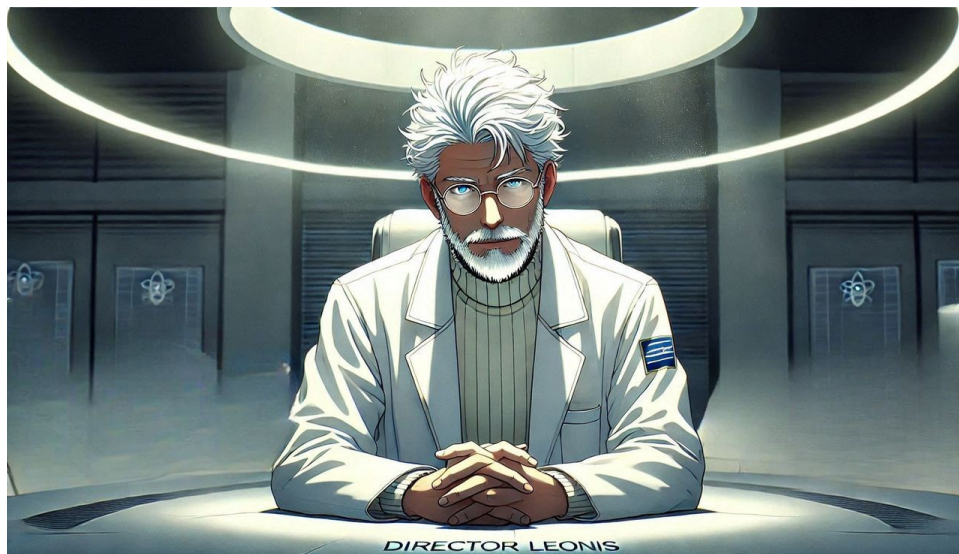
Tiffany gave a soft nod, her eyes still on the road, the cityscape outside the car window turning into countryside. The silence between them was thick, but there was something almost comforting in it—a shared understanding of the weight of their journey.

By the time they arrived at the Nexus Facility, the city had fully awakened. The sterile white walls and harsh fluorescent lights of the building felt like a stark contrast to the shadows of the outside world. As Ramsey, Cheng, and Tiffany walked down the quiet corridors, their footsteps echoed, the sound of precision and intent, a sharp reminder of the path they had chosen.

Ramsey's face remained an impenetrable mask, his every movement purposeful, but there was something in the air—the

weight of history that made the space feel heavier with each step. The conference room was just ahead, and inside it, the culmination of two decades of work waited.

At the head of the table stood Director Leonis. His white hair gleamed under the fluorescent lights, and his glasses reflected the light as he greeted Ramsey with a familiar, if somewhat nostalgic, smile. His lab coat hung loosely over his frame, a sharp contrast to the stiff uniforms of the other officials seated around the table.



"Ramsey," Leonis began, his voice steady and measured, "Twenty years in the making, and here you are, delivering the goods. Ha-ha... I didn't think I'd live to see the day."

Ramsey set the briefcase down carefully on the table, his movements deliberate, calculated. "As promised. The Heartlands Document."

No extra words were needed—no boast, no declaration. The document, itself, was a testament to the impossible feat he had achieved.

The room was heavy with expectation. Senior officials shifted in their seats, exchanging murmurs as Leonis opened the briefcase. The document inside was classified, dangerous, and monumental. He glanced over it briefly, his expression unreadable, before raising a hand to halt the other officials who were preparing to record the moment.

"You know," Leonis said, his voice breaking the silence, "Twenty years ago, we were in a room very much like this. There were plenty of us—plenty of agents here, debating over the fate of Heartlands. And most of them said it didn't matter how good Ramsey was. The operation to dismantle Heartlands from the inside was a fool's errand. They argued that no one—no one—could get close enough, let alone pull it off."

He paused, his eyes lifting as if recalling those discussions. The room seemed to lean in, as if they already knew where this was headed.

"I said back then... I said,

'We could assign the finest agents to this case, the elite of the elite, but none of them would match what he has accomplished in just a few years. His persistence is unparalleled, a relentless drive that surpasses all the patience any of you possess. In him, I see a fire, a

hunger that refuses to be extinguished. It is this unyielding determination that convinces me he will bring this case to its rightful conclusion.'

I was right wasn't I?"

Leonis let out a quiet breath, his smile softening, but his gaze sharp as he looked around the room, his eyes meeting the officials one by one.

he continued, his tone shifting with quiet pride. "All of you doubted him. You questioned the impossible. And yet here we are. Ramsey did what no one thought could be done. He did the impossible. And what's more—he did it without a single civilian life being lost."

He paused, the weight of his words sinking in. There was no boasting in his tone, no triumph. Just truth.

"None of you believed in him," Leonis said, his voice gentle but firm, "but I did. I saw something in Ramsey that no one else did. While others doubted, I knew he was the one who could finish this—because he possesses something none of us have. A rare talent, a gift, a mind that sees through all the shadows and chaos. That's why I stuck my neck out for him. I didn't need to prove anyone wrong. I just needed to believe in what was right."

He turned back to Ramsey, his expression no longer one of simple acknowledgment, but of quiet admiration.

"I was right, wasn't I? You proved us all wrong, Ramsey. But more than that, you've proven that the impossible... is just a word for people who don't know how to keep going when it seems like there's no way forward."

The officials were silent now, their gazes flicking between Ramsey and Leonis, who stood with quiet dignity. No applause followed, no grand statements—only a deep, collective understanding that this moment was something no one had thought possible.

Ramsey said nothing. He didn't need to. His actions had already spoken for him.

Leonis smiled again, a glint of pride in his eyes. "You've earned more than just respect, Ramsey. You've earned history."

Redford's sharp voice cut through the air, his tone laced with skepticism.

"Twenty years," Redford muttered, shaking his head. "It took you *twenty years* to bring down the Heartlands? That's far too long. We should've wrapped this up in two, maybe three years at most. Instead, we've wasted precious time, resources, and manpower. There's no excuse for it."

Leonis's gaze remained steady, unflinching. "You think it should have taken less time?" he asked calmly, his voice controlled but with an edge of challenge.

"Absolutely," Redford shot back, leaning forward in his seat, a hand pressed against the polished table. "We could've put more agents on it, more resources. More manpower. You didn't need to wait this long. We have elite operatives—trained specialists who could've handled this in half the time. But you chose to drag it out with this slow-burn method, and now we're left picking up the pieces."

Leonis didn't miss a beat. "And what would you have done differently, Redford? Would you have simply thrown more bodies at the problem and hoped for the best? Do you really think adding more agents would've sped things up?"

Redford's brow furrowed, a sign of irritation creeping into his voice. "Yes! It would've been more efficient. More manpower means more surveillance, more infiltration, more leverage. We could've suffocated the Heartlands within a fraction of the time. But no, you opted for a strategy that took two decades. And now we're left to clean up a mess that could've been avoided."

Leonis shook his head slowly, a slight smile forming at the corner of his lips. "More agents? You think the problem was simply a matter of numbers? Redford, if we'd added more agents, we would've had more risk. More exposure. You can't just force a delicate operation like this. Ramsey's approach wasn't about quantity. It was about *quality*. About *precision*. More agents wouldn't have solved the underlying problem. It's about knowing when to strike, not when to overwhelm."

Redford scoffed. "Precision, huh? You're telling me that one person—one *man*—was able to do what entire teams of agents couldn't in twenty years? That's hard to believe, Leonis."

Leonis leaned in, his voice lowering, but still firm. "Ramsey was never just 'one man,' Redford. You're overlooking the key part of this operation. Ramsey didn't *need* an army of agents. He understood the complexities of the Heartlands better than anyone in this room. He was already embedded within their system, their hierarchy. His access, his position—those were his advantages. What would more agents have done? Given him more threats to cover up? Slowed him down?"

Redford, not convinced, jabbed back, "But we *needed* results faster. Twenty years is a failure by any standard. This isn't just about *timing*, Leonis. This is about *efficiency*."

Leonis stood up, his movements deliberate, as he walked around the table, his voice rising slightly in the quiet room. "You're missing the point, Redford. The Heartlands weren't a *typical* target. They were entrenched, layered, hidden. You don't infiltrate something like that with brute force or speed. It takes patience, subtlety, *strategy*. Ramsey knew that. He played the long game because it was the only way. We couldn't afford a mistake. Every move had to be calculated, every misstep could've exposed us all. Do you understand what that means?"

Redford crossed his arms, clearly still uncomfortable with Leonis's reasoning. "I understand your point, but you're letting *Ramsey* off the hook too easily. If the operation had been handled more swiftly, we wouldn't be dealing with all these collateral issues. *He* made the choice to drag it out."

Leonis paused, letting Redford's words hang in the air. Then he spoke again, softer but with undeniable conviction. "There was no 'dragging it out,' Redford. There was only one choice: to do this the right way, no matter how long it took. Ramsey didn't rush it because he understood the risks. He didn't cut corners because he knew the cost of failure was far greater than what you're imagining. You want faster? You want efficiency? You *would've* had results, sure... but they would've been hollow. No, Redford. You're wrong. The only reason we're sitting here today with the Heartlands gone is because Ramsey chose to see it through, regardless of the time, the cost, or what anyone else thought."

A tense silence followed, and the room seemed to hold its breath, the weight of the conversation settling heavily on everyone present.

Redford opened his mouth to speak again, but this time, he stopped. He realized Leonis wasn't just defending Ramsey—he was defending a method, a strategy that had worked, no matter how unconventional it seemed.

Ramsey's jaw tightened at Redford's accusations, but he remained calm, his eyes cold and steady. He spoke slowly, deliberately, his voice low but cutting through the tension in the room.

"If I may add..." Ramsey began, his gaze fixed on Redford, who had just spoken.

Leonis nodded slightly, acknowledging Ramsey. "Yes, sure. What is it, Ramsey?"

Ramsey leaned forward, his eyes narrowing as he addressed the entire room. His tone was unwavering, but there was an edge to it that wasn't there before. "What resources are we talking about that were wasted on me? Sure, you may say time... but what else?"

Redford, not one to back down, shot back quickly. "The government funds and manpower." He emphasized each word with a pointed look.

Ramsey's lips curled into a tight smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. He leaned even further into the conversation, his voice steady but filled with restrained anger. "What fund? What manpower? If I remember correctly, since the year 2000, every single government benefit stopped coming in. No overlooking policemen, no funds, no more safehouses. I was all on my own. No thanks to you, of course." He let the words hang in the air, piercing the silence. "I did everything from the ground up, and I succeeded on my own without any support, using the money I gained from the Heartlands. And I succeeded without putting any civilians at risk."

The room shifted uncomfortably, but Ramsey wasn't finished. His posture straightened, every word he spoke now laced with cold certainty. "Let me make one thing clear. I didn't have the luxury of time, resources, or anyone watching my back. No one was looking out for me. No one believed I could do it. I did everything with my own hands, my own plan, and my own resources. Every move I made, every risk I took, was on me. You talk about what could have been done faster, but that's because you never had to face the reality of working with nothing. No safehouses. No backup. Just me against the world, fighting the very system you claim to have supported me with."

His voice was low but filled with the weight of years spent alone in the struggle, and the room seemed to grow heavier with the truth he was revealing. He took a deep breath, eyes scanning over the officials around the table. "I had no one when I started this. No government funding. No informants. No elite agents working behind the scenes to cover my back. I took down the Heartlands piece by piece, with every ounce of patience I could muster, and with my own people—people I had to train, control, and keep loyal while also keeping the damn system from discovering what I was doing."

Ramsey stood a little straighter, his hands resting firmly on the edge of the table, his gaze never leaving Redford. "When you sit in your cushy offices, behind layers of bureaucracy, you forget what it's like to be in the trenches. I didn't have the privilege of waiting for things to fall into place. I had to make them fall. I didn't have the safety nets you did. I survived off *my* plan and what little I had left. So

don't tell me about wasted resources. I took what was given to me, and I made something of it. You want to talk about what I did wrong? Fine. But I did it on my own, while you were too busy ignoring me."



A sharp silence filled the room. Redford's face flushed with frustration, but Ramsey didn't give him a chance to respond. The weight of his words still hung in the air like a heavy cloud. Redford opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Leonis raised his hand, his face hardening with authority.

"ENOUGH!" Leonis's voice cut through the tension, commanding the room. "We can argue about these things all day long, no problem whatsoever, but remember why we are here! This isn't about individual grievances. This is about the task at hand, the bigger picture."

Leonis paused for a moment, his tone softening, but the sharpness still present. "I... I suppose we should take a break to cool things down..." He gave Ramsey a look, signaling that the heated exchange needed to settle, but Ramsey stood his ground, his gaze never wavering.

As the meeting adjourned, the room began to clear. Redford threw a sharp, heated glare at Ramsey before leaving, but Ramsey barely acknowledged it, his expression unreadable. Once the room was empty, Leonis gestured for Ramsey, Cheng, and Tiffany to follow him. Together, they made their way to Leonis's private office, where the atmosphere felt less tense but still charged with unspoken emotions.

Leonis settled into his chair with a sigh, the weight of the recent confrontation still evident on his face. Ramsey, ever nonchalant, perched casually on the edge of the table directly in front of Leonis, his demeanor calm but his mind clearly elsewhere. Cheng and Tiffany stood nearby, quiet but attentive.

Leonis leaned back, folding his hands in front of him. "What were you thinking, Ramsey?" he asked, his tone more curious than scolding.

Ramsey shrugged, his lips curving into a faint smirk. "Don't you think we've had enough of Redford? He's like an itch that won't go away."

Leonis's brow furrowed slightly, though he didn't entirely disagree. "Maybe so, but regardless, we can't afford to start a drama here. Especially not now."

"I know..." Ramsey admitted, his tone softer, the edge in his voice momentarily dulled.

Leonis let the moment linger before offering a rare, genuine smile. "Well, regardless of everything... I'd like to personally congratulate you. We will take down the Heartlands. Once and for all. And Cheng, Tiffany," he turned to the two agents, his gaze warm and approving. "I made the right decision to send you to Ramsey when he needed help the most. You three did a phenomenal job."

Cheng, who had been standing with her arms loosely crossed, allowed a small but confident smile. "Well, that's not a problem, Leonis. We did what we could."

Tiffany fidgeted slightly, her voice hesitant but cheerful. "Umm... yes... no biggie. Hehe. And, umm..." She faltered, her tone shifting, and a faint glimmer of emotion began to show in her eyes.

Leonis's head tilted slightly, his voice softening with concern. "Yes? Something the matter, Tiffany?"

A single tear slipped down her cheek as she spoke, her voice barely a whisper. "Where... where is James?"

Leonis's expression grew somber. He leaned forward, clasping his hands together as if weighing his words. "Ah... James. Well, he's still in a coma. He's being cared for at the Biotic Lab."

Tiffany didn't wait for another word. Her breath hitched, and without a glance back, she turned on her heel and rushed out of the room, leaving an awkward silence in her wake.

Leonis blinked, then sighed. "Alright, I suppose I'll let her—" He paused, realizing she was already gone. "...Oh. She left."

Cheng watched the door close behind Tiffany, a flicker of understanding in her expression. "Can't blame her. She hasn't seen James since we came back from Nepal. Ramsey needed us more, and she had to prioritize that."

Leonis leaned back in his chair, rubbing his temple as he let out a quiet chuckle. "Love and loyalty," he mused aloud, his voice tinged with bittersweet nostalgia. "A beautiful concept, isn't it?"

Ramsey glanced toward the door where Tiffany had disappeared, his usual stoic expression softening ever so slightly. "Beautiful, sure," he said, his tone uncharacteristically reflective. "But it's a dangerous thing when you have to choose between them."

Ramsey crossed his arms, his gaze sharp and unyielding. "About loyalty," he began, his tone heavy, deliberate. "We have a problem."

Leonis, seated in his chair, leaned forward, his brow furrowed with concern. "What kind of problem?"

Ramsey hesitated for a moment, as if weighing his words. "Someone from the government is a mole. Whoever it is, they've been selling me out. Everything that's happened these past few weeks—directly or indirectly—leads back to them."

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Leonis let out a slow breath, his expression darkening. "I suspected as much... Too many cracks in the system, too many things falling apart at just the right time. But do you have any leads?"

"Not yet," Ramsey admitted. "But I can tell you this much: they've been careful, operating from the shadows, covering their tracks. Every move I've made, every plan I've set in motion—they've found a way to either counter it or twist it against me. This isn't some amateur."

Cheng, leaning casually against the wall, straightened, her gaze sharp. "Well, the documents are still here. Why don't you try reading them, Ramsey? Maybe you'll find a clue."

The Heartland Safehouse

Back at the Heartlands hideout, the atmosphere was electric, the room buzzing with activity. In the center of the chaos stood Hiram, his usual buoyant demeanor heightened to a fever pitch. Clutched tightly in his hands was the Access Card, the ultimate prize in his grasp.

"This is it," he muttered to himself, pacing in front of the control panel. "The key to everything." His voice carried a manic edge, a hunger barely contained. His face was flushed, beads of sweat forming at his temples as he reveled in the moment.

He stopped abruptly, holding the card up as if admiring a crown jewel. "With this, I'll pack off the rest of the rival gang leaders. Have them on their way, right under Ramsey's nose. They'll never see it coming." His laugh was a little too loud, a little too sharp.

With trembling hands, Hiram inserted the Access Card into the slot on the central computer system. The screen flickered to life, lines of code scrolling across as the system began its decryption process.

"Now," he murmured, his fingers flying over the keyboard, "time to decrypt this... Need to do it fast... Before... before—"

But then, without warning, the screen froze. A pulse of static filled the air, crackling unnervingly through the room. Every other device powered down, leaving only the glow of the monitor. For a moment, everything went dark.

And then the system rebooted.

The screen flickered, the usual command lines replaced by a stark black background. Slowly, the image of a red-hooded figure emerged, its face entirely obscured. A chilling silence followed before a distorted, mocking voice cut through the air.

"Congratulations, Hiram," the figure sneered, the sound mechanical and grating. "You've just handed me the final piece."

Hiram staggered back, his face draining of color. "Who... who are you? What is this?" he stammered, his voice cracking.

The figure tilted its head, as though amused by his panic. "You thought you were in control. You thought *this* was your moment." It chuckled, low and menacing. "But the truth, Hiram, is that you were always playing my game. And now, thanks to your greed, I have everything I need."

The screen began to fill with encrypted files, each flashing ominously before vanishing. Hiram lunged forward, frantically pressing buttons on the console, but it was useless. The system was locked, every command overridden by the mysterious intruder.

"No, no, no!" Hiram screamed, slamming his fists against the keyboard. "This isn't happening! Who are you? What do you want?!"

The figure leaned closer to the screen, its presence suffocating. "What I want, Hiram, is already mine. And you... you've just become expendable."

The room was bathed in the pale glow of the monitor as Hiram's hands moved feverishly over the keyboard. His breath came in short, shallow gasps, his excitement barely contained. This was it. The Access Card, the key to everything, was in his grasp. Victory felt tantalizingly close, and with it, the power to cement his place at the top.

Hiram inserted the card into the console, the machine humming to life as streams of code began to scroll across the screen. He grinned, the flickering light illuminating the sweat on his brow. "Yes," he whispered to himself. "This is it. Everything I need to take control."

But the elation was short-lived.

The screen stuttered, lines of code freezing mid-scroll. A crackling sound filled the air, sharp and unnatural, like static crawling under his skin. The lights in the room dimmed, and then the monitor went black.

"What the hell?" Hiram muttered, his pulse quickening. He jabbed at the keyboard, his fingers trembling as he tried to regain control. Nothing happened. The silence that followed was suffocating, punctuated only by the erratic thumping of his heartbeat.

Suddenly, the monitor flickered back to life. But the familiar system interface was gone. In its place was an expanse of black, stark and empty. A moment later, a figure emerged—a crimson-hooded silhouette shrouded in darkness. Its face was obscured, and yet its presence was overwhelming, oppressive. The room seemed to grow colder.

Hiram froze, his throat dry. "Who... who are you?"

The figure tilted its head, the gesture eerily deliberate. Then, a distorted, mechanical voice broke the silence, its tone mocking and razor-sharp.

"Congratulations, Hiram," it sneered. "You've just handed me the final piece."

The blood drained from Hiram's face. "What are you talking about? Who the hell are you?"

The figure's laugh was a low, grating sound that set Hiram's teeth on edge. "You thought you were playing the game. But all along, Hiram, *you were the pawn.*"

The monitor shifted, displaying a chilling sequence of images: every Heartlands hideout, every crime ring, every safehouse meticulously mapped out. Lines of data cascaded across the screen, details of operations, locations, names—all laid bare.

Hiram staggered back, his mouth dry. "No... no, this isn't possible!"

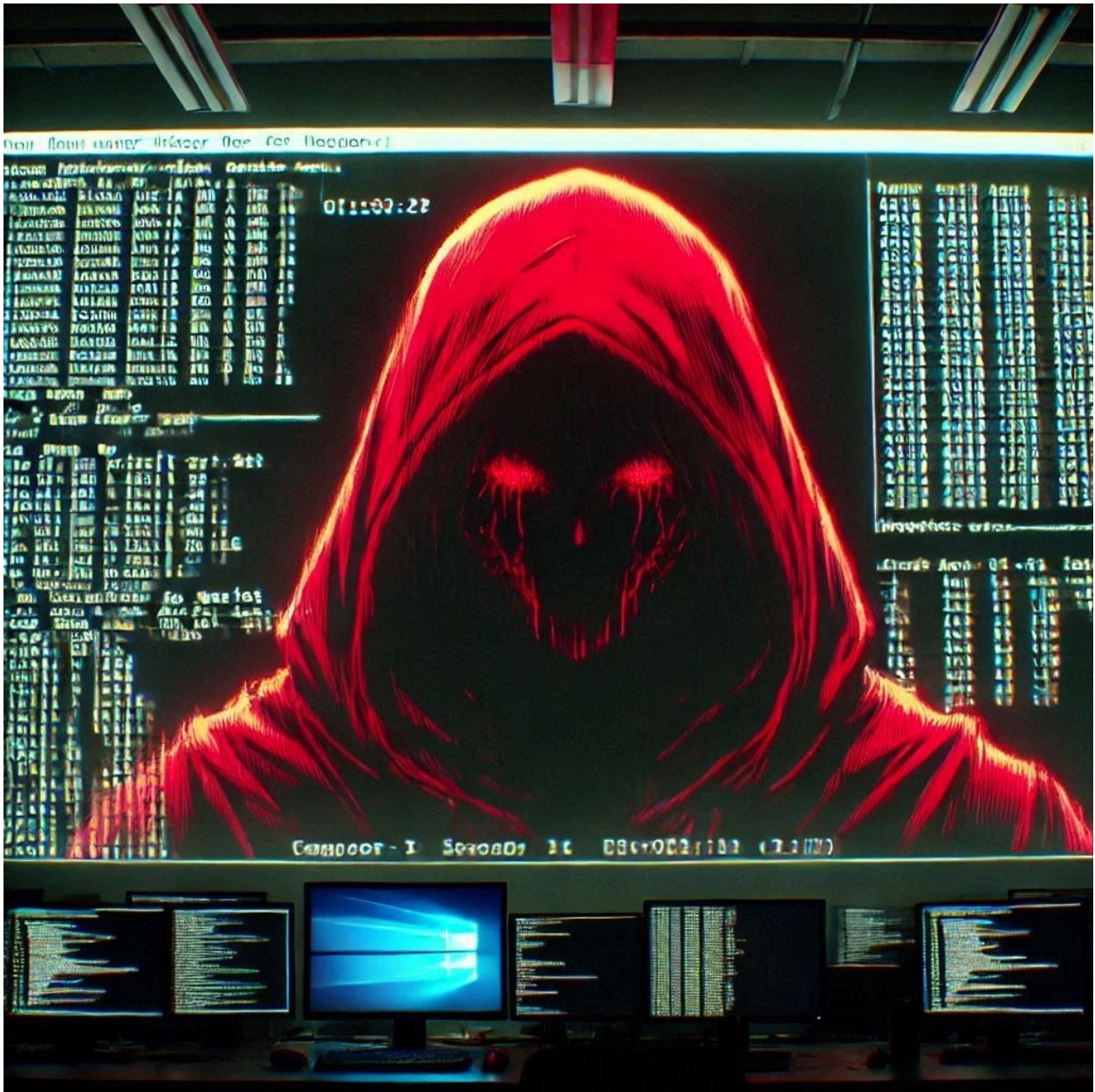
The figure's voice cut through his denial like a blade.

"Now it's time to shut down every racket, every ring, uproot every hideout, and dismantle your entire operation. I own the information now. And soon, so will everyone else."

Hiram's knees nearly buckled as the weight of the words settled in.

The voice continued, its mocking tone growing colder.

"The police will be raiding every safe place you have. Your empire will crumble, piece by piece. But don't worry, Hiram." The figure leaned closer, its unseen gaze searing. "I'll keep this safehouse untouched... just for you. So you can watch it all burn. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Tell me, Hiram—how will you survive?"



"No!" Hynam roared, slamming his fists onto the desk. His fury was a fragile mask for the terror clawing at his insides. "You bastard! Show yourself! Who are you?!"

The figure didn't respond. The screen flickered one last time, the red-hooded silhouette dissolving into static. A moment later, the

system rebooted, the usual hum of the computer returning as if nothing had happened. The room was quiet again, but the silence now felt deafening.

The Nexus Facility

Back at the Nexus Facility, the air felt thicker with every passing second. Ramsey sat at the worn, metal desk, his fingers curling around the stack of documents before him. He had seen all of this before—the crime logs, the maps, the endless names and faces tied to Heartlands' rise. It was the same dark history, the same tangled web of betrayal, alliances, and bloodshed.

He flipped through the pages, skimming the details he had already committed to memory. The familiar tale of how he and Hiram had met Khan, the formation of Heartlands, the betrayal of Zain, and the shadowy figure of the vigilante, Mid-Nite, danced across his mind like ghosts of the past. It was all the same. All the things he had heard before. All the things he had already read in Hiram's journal.

But then, something caught his eye.

At the very back of the journal, where the ink appeared fresher, there was a new entry. Ramsey's pulse quickened as he read the words, the weight of them sinking deep into his chest.

Year 2019 - September: This is the end. If this key card is gone.... the alliance will be no more. I am not worried about myself or the

Heartlands, we will still survive without the allied gang, but I am more worried about what might happen with the rest of the gangs.

A flicker. A shift in the air.

In the distance, figures moved in the shadows, gathering in tight clusters. Weapons glinted under the dim light, and whispers of desperation filled the silence. Ramsey's breath caught in his throat as he continued reading, the words blending with the tension building in the room.

They are on their final straw. The gangs in Leeds are at their breaking point. Their survival hinges on one final play.

Figures huddled around a large, glowing map of the city. Their eyes darted from street to street, from location to location, marking spots with obsessive precision. The tension was palpable, crackling through the air like an imminent storm. Ramsey's hands clenched the journal tighter, the urgency of Hiram's words sinking in.

If this deal doesn't go through, they will use their last resources to destroy everything in their path.

The figures were now hunched over a computer, their fingers rapidly pinpointing specific locations—key targets. Heartlands was at the center of it all, but Ramsey knew that it wouldn't just be his empire at risk. The entire city was on the brink.

Leeds would burn.

The words were like a punch to the gut. Ramsey leaned back in his chair, his heart pounding in his chest. He wasn't sure if it was the flickering images in his mind or the growing dread tightening around his throat, but the truth hit him with a brutal force.

Hiram's desperation wasn't just about survival. It wasn't just about protecting the Heartlands. This was bigger. Far bigger.

It was a countdown. A countdown to total annihilation.

